

A Martin Hewitt Story
by Arthur Morrison

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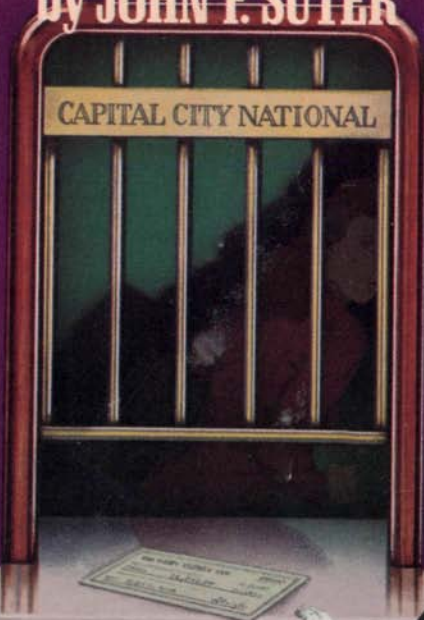
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Mid-September, 1982

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CONTENTS



SHORT STORIES

STAMPING ON CRIME by Joyce Porter	8
DEAD SOLDIER by Loren D. Estleman	26
A CLASSIC CASE by Gary Alexander	36
EYE OF THE BEHOLDER by Willie Rose	49
THE TELLER AND THE UNTOLD WEALTH by John F. Suter	65
STRANDS OF MURDER by Janet O'Daniel	104
THE INNOCENCE OF RACHEL CREWE by Virginia Moriconi	111

MYSTERY CLASSIC

THE CASE OF THE "FLITTERBAT LANCERS" by Arthur Morrison	132
--	-----

DEPARTMENTS

5 EDITOR'S NOTES	60 BOOKED & PRINTED by Mary Cannon
54 CASES ON FILE: The Disappearing Books by Katharine Kyes Leab	98 MURDER BY DIRECTION by Peter Shaw
58 SOLUTION TO THE SEPTEMBER "UNSOLVED"	101 FRAMES OF REFERENCE by Peter Christian
59 THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH	103 UNSOLVED by George J. Summers

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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

One of the things we have been enjoying most lately is the arrival of the Mysterious Photograph entries in the mail. Every kind of story imaginable has been produced regarding the August photograph, for instance, and they are—as of this writing—still coming in. It appears that the entrants have been having fun with it. And we hope that it continues to provide that.

The only thing that has occurred to us apropos of our own paragraph of contest rules, such as they are, is that we might have suggested one other item. Some of the best stories so far are those that do the most with the various parts of the picture—that try to work various parts of the setting into the story. Who lives in these houses, or is waiting behind those windows? Where does the path lead, and what lies around this corner? What is the significance of someone's particular sort of hat or cane? That sort of thing might be worth investigating.

We hope to announce the Au-

gust winner in the November issue. And this time around, the Mysterious Photograph has a particularly Hitchcockian atmosphere, we think.

While we're on the subject of new departments, let us also mention that we'd like your suggestions and ideas. Do you, for example, have a favorite Mystery Classic of your own? A story you remember vividly and think others may not have read? If so, let us know. We'll certainly give it consideration.

Or have you run across an interesting unsolved mystery? Same thing goes for that—send us the information and we'll try to track it down.

The Cases on File article in this issue is a little different from the two preceding ones, in the sense that it involves a lot of mysteries—the theft of many different kinds of rare books, in fact—and a new way of solving them, with computers. Kathy Leab, its author, has been instrumental in setting up that new method, and we asked her to tell us about it.

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When you're making plans for the fall, you might want to know that Bouchercon, the big mystery and science fiction convention which is held every year over the Columbus Day weekend, will be held this year in San Francisco. This will be the thirteenth annual Bouchercon (certainly a number favored by mystery readers), and it promises to be as exciting a convention as was last year's in Milwaukee. The Bouchercon tradition began in memory of Anthony Boucher, the great mystery critic and author. It's a good occasion for mystery fans to gather; there will be films, panels on everything from Sherlock Holmes to the pulps to tax advice for collectors, and mystery writer Robert B. Parker will be the Guest of Honor. To register, contact Don Herron, 537 Jones Street, Apt. 9207, San Francisco, California 94102.

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FICTION

STAMPING ON by Joyce Porter CRIME

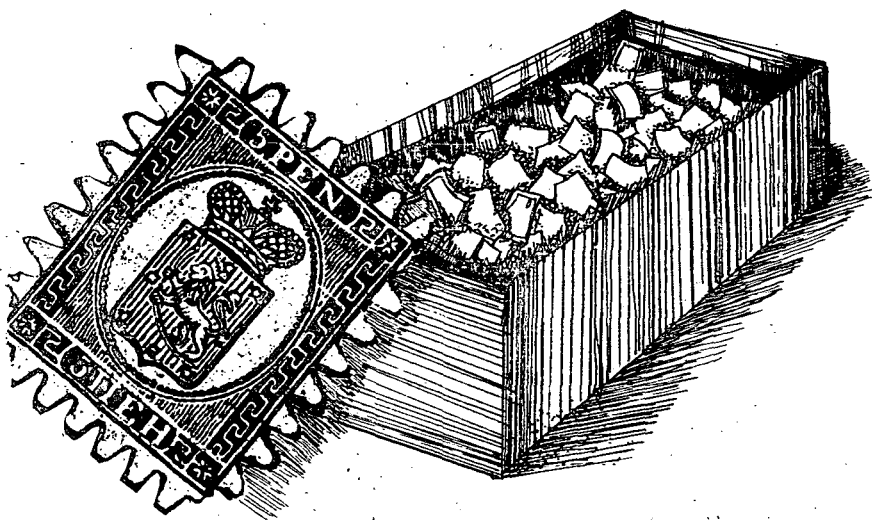


Illustration by Lisa Mansollilo

Mina Hoole cleared her throat. The Honourable Constance Morrison-Burke's concentration wasn't quite as total as she liked to think. Slowly she let her breath out and turned round. God only knows, Mina Hoole had enough to worry about, but curiosity had gotten the better of her. "What on earth are you doing, Constance?"

It was a fair question. Most people would have been puzzled by the sight of a well-built, middle-aged woman, draped in an ample pair of striped pajamas, standing by the shed in her garden and glowering at a pile of bricks.

The Hon. Con (which is what most people spoke of her as) screwed up her eyes against the bright sunshine. "Karate," she explained proudly. "Just taken it up." She indicated her pajamas. "Hence the improvised gear."

"Oh. Your—er—Miss Jones said I'd find you out here." The significance of the pile of bricks now struck Mrs. Hoole—especially the single brick on top, poised bridge-like on two others. "You're not thinking of

breaking that with your bare hand, are you?"

The Hon. Con made a few experimental chops in the air. "It's all in the mind," she announced confidently. "However,"—she switched the conversation deftly before anybody could be tactless enough to ask for a practical demonstration—"don't suppose you've called to discuss the finer points of open-hand fighting."

Mina Hoole allowed that this was, indeed, the case. "Actually, I've come for your help."

The Hon. Con beamed. "Super! What's the trouble?"

Mina Hoole dabbed at her brow. "Do you think I could sit down, Constance? The heat and . . ."

The Hon. Con hastened to shake out a deck chair. "You do look a bit ropery, Mina. Here, have a pew! By the way, it won't worry you if I go on with my exercises, will it?" She clawed at nothing in particular with two fingers. "That's called 'twin dragons fighting for the pearl,'" she explained kindly.

Mina Hoole managed a vague smile. "It's really Benedict I've come about." Benedict was

her husband. "He's in a dreadful state. He's been accused of stealing."

"Blimey O'Riley!" gasped the Hon. Con. "What's he been doing? Nicking some of our priceless flint artifacts?" Benedict Hoole was curator of the Totterbridge & District Museum, and the Hon. Con had been waxing humorous about it for years.

"He's been accused of stealing a postage stamp worth twenty-five pounds!" said Mina Hoole in a tearful rush. "A pre-war, eight-pfennig Germania."

The Hon. Con folded her fingers into the "leopard punch." "You sound somewhat of a philatelic cognoscente yourself, old fruit!"

"What did you say, Constance? I didn't quite catch."

The Hon. Con filled her lungs. "I said you sounded as though you knew what you were talking about!" she roared.

Mina Hoole winced. "I used to collect myself, years ago. And there's no need to shout, Constance. I'm not deaf."

"You could have fooled me!" muttered the Hon. Con under her breath as she bounced around before assuming a flexible "T" stance. "Are the cops after him?"

"Good heavens, no! It won't

come to anything like that. It might be better if it did. No, it's just a question of the incident's being reported at the next meeting of the Stamp Collectors' Circle and then Benedict will have no choice but to resign. He's in the running for president this year, too. He didn't take the damned stamp, of course, but who's going to believe that? And you know that Stamp Collectors crowd. They're bigger gossips than the Young Wives. It'll be all over Totterbridge in a matter of hours, and then what will happen? He could lose his job."

To hide her excitement, the Hon. Con let fly with a couple of "crossed arm double back knuckle snapping thrust" punches. Whoopee! Back to the old deerstalker and meerschau pipe again! Up with the little grey cells and spray me an orchid!

This might be as good a time as any to say a few words about the Hon. Con. She was (as the more perceptive readers will have already gathered) something of a father-figure for those of her acquaintance who had problems. They turned to her in their hour of need not solely because of her noble birth, lion-hearted courage, and towering intelligence but also because

she was probably Totterbridge's finest private detective and, unlike that shifty-looking joker who'd set up as the Eagle Eye Bureau (Divorce & Industrial Espionage Our Speciality) at the bottom of Market Street, she didn't send in a bill for her services. Regrettably, from the Hon. Con's point of view, small provincial towns like Totterbridge don't really have much crime and, although she was quite willing to proffer advice on marital matters, post-natal depression, bed wetting, and how to cope with teenagers, most people in these cases preferred to consult someone who was at least married and not cushioned against many of the sharp corners of life by a very substantial private income. All of which explains why, from time to time, the Hon. Con had to fill her days with karate; home carpentry, evening classes in colloquial Finnish, setting cat traps, organising Rugby football for ladies, and so forth. And why, when a grotty little crime like the theft of a postage stamp came along, she went at it like a bull at a gate.

The Hon. Con got her emotions under control. "Who says he's nicked this stamp?"

"Freddie Dwyer." Mina Hoole sighed and hoped she was doing

the right thing. "Do you know him? He lives almost opposite us."

For once the Hon. Con's infallible memory was not found wanting. "That sanctimonious young whippersnapper who managed the Building Society in Jubilee Street? I certainly do. We crossed swords over the provision of public conveniences in the new car park."

Mina Hoole had attended the public meeting at which this explosive subject had been thrashed out, and it had left an indelible impression. Especially the moment when the Hon. Con had been evicted bodily from the hall by a flying formation of self-appointed ushers.

"His stamp, was it?" The glint of battle was already flickering in the Hon. Con's eyes.

"Oh, no. Well, not exactly. It's a bit complicated."

The Hon. Con waited patiently, recognizing that Mina Hoole, like most women, had about as much brain as a flea.

"Well, both Freddie and my husband are members of the Stamp Collectors' Circle."

"Me, too. Once," mused the Hon. Con. "Till that blooming old vacuum cleaner ran amuck. Hardly my fault and they got most of the stamps back anyhow."

"Besides the monthly meetings," Mina Hoole went on with a touch of desperation, "they also circulate a box of stamps for sale so the members can look at them at home. Anybody who wants to sell a stamp puts it in the box with a card stating the price, and anybody who wants to buy it takes it out and replaces it with the money. There are various sorts of lists and envelopes and things, just to keep the records straight. When the box comes round to the man who put the stamp in, he just takes the money or the check out. They try to keep it as simple as possible, and as you can see, Constance, it's all based on mutual trust."

"Which Freddie the Rat claims your hubbie has betrayed?" The Hon. Con had already sorted out the Good Guys from the Bad Guys.

"Mary St. Sinclair brought the box round to Benedict at lunchtime yesterday and Benedict passed it on to Freddie Dwyer at about half past six. That's the way it's been circulating for years. Well, at eight o'clock or so, Freddie came round to the house and said this stamp appeared to be missing and had Benedict happened to have forgotten to put his money in and sign the list and everything.

Benedict was absolutely shattered. You know how sensitive he is. The fact is—he'd barely looked at the stamps. We'd had Paul and Elsie and the children round for the afternoon and, in any case, Benedict specializes in Edward the Seventh issues. He wouldn't be even mildly interested in pre-war Germans. Well, Freddie Dwyer started cross-questioning him in a most unpleasant manner and more or less trapped him into admitting he'd actually seen this missing stamp." Mina Hoole sagged hopelessly in her deck chair. "Which just meant that Miss St. Sinclair couldn't have taken it."

The Hon. Con scowled fiercely and launched herself into a nifty "side straight stomp" kick, just to keep the old antennae twanging. "It could have slipped down the back of a chair or something."

Mina Hoole shook her head. "It would be stuck on a piece of card the size of a postcard and in a plastic envelope. Not easy to overlook. Besides, I searched absolutely everywhere. There's something else, too, Constance."

"Such as?"

"It's happened twice before."

The Hon. Con emitted a silent whistle. "Holy cats, do you mean this is the *third* time the

dread Dwyer's found a blooming stamp missing when your husband's passed the box on to him?"

Mrs. Hoole nodded. "That's why he feels honor bound this time to make a report to the Stamp Collectors' Circle. Once—even twice—might be an accident, but three times . . ."

"And he's actually accusing old Benedict of theft?"

"Either that or criminal carelessness. What difference does it make? Benedict feels he'll never be able to hold up his head in Totterbridge again. I mean, who's going to trust a museum curator who 'mislays' valuable articles belonging to other people? He's out of his mind with worry, Constance. Do you think you can help?"

With a noble gesture, the Hon. Con leaned across and for the duration closed her handbook on karate for boys. Then she patted Mina Hoole reassuringly on the arm. "Trust your old uncle!" She swung round to face the house and opened her shoulders. "*Bones! At the double, old bean!*"

Mina Hoole winced.

Miss Jones, white-faced, came scurrying as fast as she could down the path. "Has something happened, dear?"

Miss Jones shared the Hon. Con's bijou residence of "Shangrila," 14, Upper Waxwing Drive, though on precisely what terms even the most intensive local prying had failed to discover. Was Miss Jones a paid drudge, or just a good friend who positively enjoyed ministering to the Hon. Con's every need? Was she the Hon. Con's better half or her punch-bag? Nobody was ever completely sure.

Whatever the relationship between the pair of them was, however, it was clear that the Hon. Con had scant regard for the fragility of Miss Jones's nerves. "Just going to escort old Mina home, Bones!" she belted cheerfully.

Miss Jones clutched her heart. "I thought there'd been an accident, dear."

"Your imagination'll be the death of you! Shan't be long!"

Luckily Miss Jones was never too flustered to observe the decencies. She indicated the Hon. Con's pajamas with a trembling hand. "You are going to put some proper clothes on first, though, aren't you, dear?"

The Hooles were quite near neighbors and so it wasn't more than ten minutes later that the Hon. Con was busy establishing her ascendancy over Bene-

dict Hoole in his own sitting room. True, she had been momentarily put out of her stride when she discovered that she and her host were wearing identical trousers—a loss leader at a recent sale in Marks & Spencer's men's department—but a merry quip about great minds thinking alike had soon smoothed that little embarrassment over.

"Come to examine the scene of the crime," explained the Hon. Con as Benedict Hoole, drawn and haggard, tried to cringe even farther back in his chair. A cloud had come over the Hon. Con's face, for she hated a slacker. "Not at work, Bengie?"

"I've told them I'm ill," mumbled Benedict Hoole, in no condition to take exception to the diminutive. "Dear God, you can hardly expect me to concentrate on Minoan pottery sherds with my whole life in ruins."

The Hon. Con swung a chair round and straddled it in true cowboy fashion. "Mina's given me the bare bones," she began. "Want you to cross the i's and dot the t's. Now, the St. Sinclair woman brought the box of stamps round to you at midday. What did you do with it?"

"I took it straight upstairs and put it on the wardrobe."

"Without opening it?"

"Mary said she didn't think there was anything of interest to me, so I didn't bother."

"Do you always stick it on top of the wardrobe?"

"The grandchildren were coming to spend the afternoon with us," said Benedict Hoole sullenly. "Bloody little savages! Talk about the chimpanzees' tea party! When those two kids are due, I stow half our wordly possessions on top of the damned wardrobe. And to think Mina actually wants us to move down to Brighton to be near them! God forbid!"

The Hon. Con was disgruntled to find a plausible solution looming up so early in her investigation, but Benedict Hoole gloomily pooh-poohed the idea.

"Not a hope, Constance," he declared. "That wardrobe's ten feet high, if it's an inch. The brats are only five and six. They couldn't possibly reach it. Besides, they wouldn't just have selected the most expensive stamp, would they? They'd have chewed up the lot, box included. In any case, I'd locked the bedroom door."

The Hon. Con breathed again. "When did you actually look at the stamps?"

"Not till the family had gone. About six, I suppose."

"And you really saw this German stamp?"

Benedict Hoole took on a hunted expression. "I think so."

"Good grief, Bengie, don't you know? Didn't you check the contents?"

"I was in a hurry, and damned tired. I just sort of leafed through the plastic envelopes, looking at the stamps. I wasn't interested in any of them so I didn't bother comparing them with the list to make sure they were all there. Mary St. Sinclair's as conscientious as all hell, so I took the risk. And Freddie Dwyer's always in such a sweat if he thinks he's being kept waiting."

"But he's accused you twice before of taking stamps without paying for them, hasn't he?"

Benedict Hoole's whole body crumpled. "I was counting on lightning not striking in the same place," he muttered.

The Hon. Con stared at him incredulously. "What happened on the other two occasions?" she demanded.

"Oh, I just sort of apologized for my oversight, and paid up. It seemed the simplest way out. Less fuss and bother. I offered to do it this time but Freddie Dwyer wouldn't play. He's set on having his pound of flesh."

"But you do think the miss-

ing stamp was in the box?"

Benedict Hoole was feeling very sorry for himself. "I am almost certain it was. We don't get many at that price."

Mina Hoole was summoned from the kitchen to take the Hon. Con upstairs and show her the wardrobe.

"How did you find him, Constance?" she asked.

"Pretty chop-fallen."

"Freddie Dwyer really was most unpleasant." Mina Hoole paused halfway up the stairs and took a breather. "Mind you, Benedict's not been himself for some time. I want him to retire, you know. Have a proper change. Move out of Tottenhambridge and go and live by the sea."

"He mentioned you wanted to move down to Brighton to be near the kids."

"It was lovely seeing them yesterday," said Mina Hoole wistfully as she turned to tackle the last few stairs. "And Paul, too. It gave us chance for a really good chat. My hearing's not what it was, you know, and I seem to be absolutely hopeless on the telephone. That's really why I called round to see you, Constance, instead of ringing. Now, then—here's the bedroom! And there's the wardrobe!"

“Solid mahogany,” the Hon. Con told Miss Jones over a late lunch. “Even a grown-up would need a chair to reach the top of it and I can’t see a couple of kids getting within miles, even if the door hadn’t been locked. Anyhow, Mina said they never went upstairs at all. Used the downstairs cloakroom and everything.” The Hon. Con opened up her Marmite sandwich and examined it disconsolately. They were having one of Miss Jones’s austerity days, instituted in aid of the Hon. Con’s burgeoning hip measurement. “They’ve got the most gi-normous double bed.”

Miss Jones flushed, and deftly broached a less Rabelaisian subject. “Are you going to call on Mr. Dwyer, dear?”

Mouth full (no mean feat, given the sandwich), the Hon. Con nodded. “Gave his missus a tinkle from the Hooles.” The Hon. Con protected her telephone bill with the devotion of a mother hen protecting her chicks. “Going to pop round and have a confab about six.” She grinned. “The cocktail hour!”

It was one of life’s little ironies that Miss Jones, despite not being one of Nature’s great detectives, was far more knowledgeable about the neighbors

than some we could name. “Oh, I doubt it, dear. Not the Dwyers. He’s an elder at that funny little chapel in Bedlow Street and I’m pretty certain he’s teetotal.”

“He sounds a proper sanctimonious pup,” said the Hon. Con gloomily. “Which makes it all the more curiouiser.”

“How’s that, dear?”

The Hon. Con hunched a pair of shoulders many a heavyweight boxer would have envied. “Simply that either Bengie Hoole or this Dwyer chappie is lying in his teeth. If Bengie didn’t purloin that stamp, consciously or unconsciously, then old holier-than-thou F. Dwyer, Esquire, is setting him up.”

What with all her domestic chores, Miss Jones didn’t have time to watch a lot of television. “Setting him up, dear?”

“Framing him,” explained the Hon. Con, who not only watched all the crime stories on the box but took notes as well. “And there’s no need to look so pofaced, Bones! I know these blooming philatelists. Look what they did to me! Some of ’em’d stop at nothing, up to and including murder!”

Miss Jones got a little creakily to her feet and began to clear the table. “Now, don’t exaggerate, dear.”

"Bengie Hoole's in the running for president, isn't he? Suppose Dwyer's got ambitions in the same direction?"

"Then he certainly wouldn't make false accusations about Mr. Hoole, dear," said Miss Jones firmly. "He may be rather straightlaced but I'm sure he's neither devious nor malicious." She moved over to the kitchen sink and began pulling on her rubber gloves. "I wonder why Mr. Hoole didn't just change the order."

The Hon. Con extracted herself from behind the table in the dinette. "How do you mean?"

"Well, you said that this was the third time that Mr. Dwyer claimed that a postage stamp was missing from the box, didn't you, dear? Well, since it was causing so much unpleasantness and worry, I was wondering why Mr. Hoole didn't change the order and simply pass the box on to somebody else."

"That crossed my mind, too," said the Hon. Con without a blush. "I suppose he was afraid it might look like an admission of guilt. You see, old Bengie's position is that he'd nothing to do with the disappearance of any of these stamps, either accidentally or on purpose. Well, he's not so sure about the first two, actually. He admits he

could have sort of dropped them or something. But he's adamant about this last one. Besides," —the Hon. Con scowled horribly as she tried to concentrate—"if he started passing that blooming box to somebody else, it'd be tantamount to accusing Freddie Sourpuss Dwyer of nicking them, wouldn't it?"

Miss Jones agreed absently that it would and shooed the Hon. Con out into the garden to get the benefit of the fresh air.

The Hon. Con spent the afternoon rigorously strengthening her fingers in a flowerpot full of sand, but when she found herself face to face with Freddie Dwyer at just after six, the thought did cross her mind that she had, perhaps, over-trained for the encounter. She had, however, given Miss Jones her solemn word of honor not to mention ladies' lavatories unless he did.

Freddie Dwyer was quite a young man—clean shaven, close-cropped of hair, and neatly conservative when it came to suits and ties. He jumped politely to his feet when his wife showed the Hon. Con into the lounge and insisted on conducting her to the most comfortable chair.

The Hon. Con, ever on the qui vive for attempts to treat her as a sex object, sat down warily.

Freddie Dwyer offered refreshment. A glass of his wife's homemade lemonade, perhaps?

The Hon. Con accepted.

When this little flurry of activity was over, the three of them sat there, glasses in hand; and looked at each other. The Dwyers were waiting for the Hon. Con to make the first move.

She didn't disappoint them, and kicked off by trying to get rid of Mrs. Dwyer. "You interested in postage stamps, too?"

But Jilly Dwyer was no push-over. "I should think not!" she replied with a shriek of laughter and remained, infuriatingly, where she was.

The Hon. Con turned, with a scowl, to her chief victim.

Freddie Dwyer gave his version of the incident without demur. He, of course, always checked everything, not forgetting the number on his bus ticket.

"The first thing I do, Miss Morrison-Burke," he explained ponderously, "is to ascertain that every transparent envelope contains its stamp, together with the name of the seller, the price being asked, and an accurate description of

the stamp itself. You'd be surprised how careless some people are about these details. Then I compare the envelopes with the list and make sure everything tallies. It only takes a moment. Then I check that the money for every stamp purchased has been placed in the box. You'd be surprised how careless some people are about that, too. It's only when I am perfectly satisfied that everything is in order that I begin examining the stamps as stamps, if you see what I mean. Well, on this occasion, when I discovered that that expensive German stamp, while appearing on the list, was not in the box, I felt I really had no choice. The whole idea of circulating the box of stamps is based on trust. In my humble opinion, Mr. Hoole, for whatever reason, is no longer trustworthy. I am not making any judgments and I am certainly not accusing Mr. Hoole of theft. It's merely that I see it as my inescapable and painful duty now to make a report on the facts to our colleagues."

"I think it's like shoplifting," said Jilly Dwyer, though nobody had asked for her tuppence-worth. "A sort of cry for help."

The Hon. Con purported to

ignore the interruption.

"Yes, really," insisted Jilly Dwyer. "He's getting on a bit, isn't he? Sort of male menopausal. Nearing retirement age and his kids all grown up and everything. He feels useless and that he's lost his role in society. Then he gets depressed and sort of steals things. It's just a sort of appeal for attention, really."

The Hon. Con snorted. She didn't hold with other people's attempts at amateur psychology.

"And then there's all that worry about his wife's health, as well."

"Mina?" demanded the Hon. Con. "She looks fit enough to me. Going a bit deaf, of course, but otherwise . . ."

"Ménière's Disease," said Jilly Dwyer, dropping her voice confidentially. "That means her hearing's going to get worse and deaf aids and things are no help at all. She was telling me all about it in the hairdresser's a month or so ago. Eventually she'll have to give up driving the car and everything. Well, it all builds up, doesn't it?"

The phone in the hall began ringing and Mrs. Dwyer excused herself to go and answer it. "That'll be Dilly," explained Freddie Dwyer as the Hon. Con prepared to settle down for a

real man-to-man talk at last. "The wife's twin sister. She usually rings about this time. They're very close."

"Are they?"

Maybe it was nerves that was making Freddie Dwyer so chatty. "They're trying to find somewhere to live here in Totterbridge."

The Hon. Con spoke through a tightening jaw. "Fancy."

"You don't happen to know of any houses for sale, do you, Miss Morrison-Burke? We've been looking for something for Dilly and her husband for months. Property's very tight round here. He's coming out of the navy next month so it's getting a bit urgent. I've got him fixed up with a good job all right, but a house . . . Of course, they could always come and stay with us for a bit but even Jilly's not too keen on that. You know what it's like—two women sharing one kitchen . . ."

The Hon. Con did not know what it was like, and was pretty mad at its being assumed that she did. Ruthlessly she brushed the dreary Dilly and her sailor husband aside to take Freddie Dwyer through his story again. How he'd received the box of stamps, where he'd opened it, how he'd examined it, what he'd . . .

"Hang on a sec!" barked the Hon. Con, cursing herself for not having brought old Bones along to take notes. "You didn't say that before!"

"Say what, Miss Morrison-Burke?"

"That you'd had your blooming supper before you opened the box."

"Didn't I? Well, I can't see what difference it makes. The box was brought straight into this room as soon as I received it, and it was only ever opened in this room. I can assure you that, as soon as I found the Germania stamp was missing, the first thing I did was to search everywhere most meticulously, just in case it might have dropped out. It hadn't, of course."

"But you didn't have your supper in here, did you?"

"Certainly not!" said Freddie Dwyer stiffly. "We ate in the dining room."

"So the box was in here, unguarded."

Freddie Dwyer shook his head. "I really don't see what that has to do with anything. The house wasn't burgled last night. Nobody broke in during the half an hour or so while we were in the dining room and, ignoring everything else of value in the room, simply took one twenty-five pound stamp. I keep

this house extremely well locked up. Always. I can show you, if you like. I don't believe in putting temptation in the way of people who may be more susceptible and less fortunate than ourselves."

"Do you collect pre-war German stamps?" asked the Hon. Con, trying to slip the cunning question in like a knife into her host's back.

Freddie Dwyer's fraying patience just held. "I collect French colonials," he said with quiet dignity. "Exclusively. You may care to inspect my albums. You won't find a single German stamp in them. Not one."

Later that evening, sprawled in front of the television set watching "Top of the Pops" with the sound turned off, the Hon. Con reviewed her investigation thus far. Not the crime of the century, perhaps, but intriguing enough to help keep the old paw from losing its cunning. It was also a welcome change from karate. Funny how none of the blooming books warned you how much karate hurt.

Miss Jones, having washed up, locked up, and turned the beds down, came in with the coffee. "Why don't you just switch it off, dear?"

The Hon. Con grunted. "How well do you know Mina Hoole?" She frequently used Miss Jones as a brick wall off which ideas could be bounced.

"Oh, quite well, dear."

"Thing is," said the Hon. Con, "if Bengie Hoole had sort of absentmindedly taken that stamp, you'd expect it to be kicking around somewhere, wouldn't you. They've looked. Not a trace. No card, no envelope, nothing. In a house with electric central heating."

Miss Jones looked away. "There is the toilet, dear."

"Whereas, if it had been purloined deliberately, you'd expect it to be deucedly well hidden or destroyed, wouldn't you?"

"But why on earth steal a stamp worth all that money just to destroy it, dear?"

The Hon. Con heaved herself up into a slightly more elegant posture. "That's been your trouble all along, Bones. Barking up the wrong tree by concentrating on the stamp. You've completely overlooked the real motivation."

"Have I, dear?"

The Hon. Con spooned up the sugar from the bottom of her empty coffee cup. "Suppose the thief wasn't interested in the stamp as a stamp, but only as a means of disgracing Bengie

Hoole and maybe driving him potty with worry?"

"But a number of stamps have been mislaid, haven't they, dear?"

The Hon. Con nodded. "A deliberate campaign extended over several months."

"And you think *Mrs.* Hoole . . . ?"

"Who else? She wants him to pack his job in at the museum and go and live near this son of theirs in Brighton. Bengie's not keen. So, what better way to get him to move than make it impossible for him to stay in Totterbridge?"

Miss Jones put her coffee cup back neatly on the tray and looked round for her knitting. "I know *Mrs.* Hoole misses her son and the children dreadfully, but she would never do anything as cruel as that to Mr. Hoole, dear."

"She's getting so she can't hear on the phone now," the Hon. Con pointed out.

"I know, dear," agreed Miss Jones unhappily. "I was wondering this morning why on earth she doesn't get a hearing aid."

It wasn't often that the Hon. Con knew more local tittle-tattle than Miss Jones. "*Ménière's Disease*," she said nonchalantly.

Miss Jones let her knitting drop to her lap. "Oh, poor woman! Are you sure, dear?"

"It's what the Dwyer female said."

"Then she certainly wouldn't have gone scrambling up on a chair to reach the top of that wardrobe and extracting the postage stamp, dear." To the Hon. Con's chagrin, Miss Jones actually seemed to know what Ménière's Disease was. "She'd never take the risk. Ménière's Disease affects your sense of balance, you know. One of my cousins had it, and deafness is only part of the trouble. You get attacks of giddiness and nausea, too."

"Don't mean she *didn't* climb up," objected the Hon. Con who didn't care to have her pet theories trampled into the dust by stray smatterings of medical knowledge.

Miss Jones retrieved her knitting and began counting the stitches. "Of course not, dear. It just makes it extremely unlikely, that's all."

The Hon. Con slumped back in her chair. "Which leaves us back where we blooming well started!" she complained. "Either Bengie Hoole is losing his marbles and took that dratted stamp without knowing what he was doing, or Freddie

Dwyer is prepared to go to any lengths to stop Bengie's becoming president of the Stamp Collectors' Circle." She blew her cheeks out. "Holy smoke!" she said disgustedly.

"Is there nobody else, dear?"

"Only Mina Hoole and you've just scotched her!"

"I should sleep on it, dear," advised Miss Jones soothingly. She thought most of life's problems were best solved in bed. "I'm sure everything will look quite different in the morning."

But the Hon. Con wasn't listening. "I'm going potty!" she announced excitedly, and didn't even pause so Miss Jones could contradict her. "Of course! What a chump! Why didn't I think of it before? There *was* somebody else who could easily have got their paws on that box. Jilly Blooming Dwyer!"

"Mr. Dwyer's wife? But she's not interested in stamps, is she, dear?"

"Oh, don't be such a duffer, Bones!" snapped the Hon. Con irritably. "I keep telling you—this case has nothing to do with stamps."

"Even so, dear." Miss Jones happened to know Mrs. Dwyer slightly, and judged her to be a perfectly respectable, if slightly common, young woman.

Fortunately for the forces of

law and order, the Hon. Con's imagination was less pedestrian. "She's the culprit. Gosh, it sticks out a mile! She'd ample opportunity. Dwyer got that box just before they were going to have their supper so he left it, unopened, in the sitting room. It'd be there for—what?—an hour?—half an hour? Bags of time for his wife to get at it. It needn't have taken her more than a couple of seconds. She didn't have to search for the most expensive stamp, either, really. Any missing stamp would have been enough to cook old Bengie's goose for him, once Dwyer got on his high moral horse."

"But why on earth should she want to harm Mr. Hoole, dear?"

"Because of the house!"

"Mr. *Hoole's* house, dear?"

"Jilly Dwyer's twin sister and her husband want to come and live in Totterbridge, but they can't find a house. Now, Jilly Dwyer knows Mina Hoole would like to go off to Brighton, but Bengie's not keen on the idea. So, if the Dwyer woman can only put the skids under him—hey presto, there's a house for sale! Quite a pleasant little residence, in good nick and within easy spitting distance. Absolutely ideal, and Jilly Dwyer's right there on the

ground floor ready to make an offer before anybody else even hears about it."

Miss Jones carefully purred a whole row of stitches to steady her nerves. "It sounds a rather inadequate motive, dear."

It was a point of honor with the Hon. Con to stick to her guns, even when she was wrong. In this instance, however, she knew she was right. She wasn't even offended by Miss Jones's gentle objection. "Twins are like that," she declared with every confidence. "They'd do anything for each other. Telepathic links and so forth."

"But we're talking about an attempt to drive poor Mr. Hoole into an early retirement and possibly a nervous breakdown, dear."

"Not everybody's got our standards, old girl."

This was very true, but Miss Jones's mind had already moved on to another problem. It was wickedly selfish, no doubt, but when it came right down to it she cared a good deal less about the Dwyers and even the Hooles of this world than she did about the Hon. Con. "What are you going to do now, dear?" she inquired with an apprehension born of long experience. Totterbridge was a small town and one couldn't help continually

running into people, no matter how much one had wildly accused or grossly insulted them. The Hon. Con had the hide of a rhinoceros, of course, but Miss Jones was made of more sensitive stuff.

"Was just pondering about that, Bones," admitted the Hon. Con solemnly. "My first instinct is naturally to trot round there pronto and beard Jilly Dwyer in her den. Straight from the shoulder and no holds barred."

There was a sharp and anguished intake of breath from Miss Jones.

"Trouble is," the Hon. Con rumbled on, "I ain't got no proof."

"Oh, quite, dear!" exclaimed Miss Jones, much too eagerly.

"Or there's the cops."

Under Miss Jones's nerveless fingers the Fair Isle pattern she was knitting began disintegrating beyond recall. "Surely this isn't a matter for the police, dear?"

The Hon. Con raised her eyebrows. "The stamp was stolen, Bones."

"But the *police*!" moaned Miss Jones, previous confrontations between dear Constance and those long-suffering boys-in-blue flooding back uninvited into her mind.

"I take your point, Bones," agreed the Hon. Con. "I've come to the conclusion that it's really up to the Stamp Collectors' Circle to take any official action. The stamp was more or less their pigeon at the time it was nicked and I'm only involved in the business as an expert adviser to old Mina."

Miss Jones sagged with relief. "What a good idea, Constance! I'm sure you're doing the right thing. Just let the whole matter drop, dear! I mean, if you start making accusations, Mrs. Dwyer might sue you and get terrific damages."

The Hon. Con was rarely foolhardy where money was concerned. "On the other hand," she said, "I have got an obligation to my clients, haven't I?"

Miss Jones clutched her ruined knitting to where her bosom would have been if she'd had one. "The Hooles, dear? Oh, good heavens, you're not going to tell them that Mrs. Dwyer stole that stamp just so that her sister could buy their house, are you?"

The Hon. Con's face split into a wicked grin as she leaned forward and turned up the sound on the television set. "You can bet your sweet life I am! Light the blue touch-paper and stand well back, eh? It beats karate!"

In the event, however, it was less of a rocket than a damp squib.

On the following morning the Hon. Con came back from her mission of enlightenment to Mina Hoole with a face as black as an old boot.

Miss Jones enquired cautiously if anything was wrong.

"Women!" spat the Hon. Con in deep disgust. "Sometimes I wonder why I bother."

"Didn't Mrs. Hoole appreciate what you'd done for her, dear?" asked Miss Jones who knew that nothing got up the Hon. Con's nose like ingratitude.

"I don't expect folk to go into raptures, Bones," explained the Hon. Con with a pathetic sigh. "You know that. A simple 'thank you' does me. I get my reward from knowing I've done someone a good turn. On the other hand,"—and here the Hon. Con's face broke into a bleak scowl—"I don't care to see all my efforts going for naught. I expect people to act in a rational and civilized manner. Like storming out there and then and ramming the Dwyer woman's teeth down her throat."

Miss Jones blinked. "Oh, but I don't think Mrs Hoole is that type of . . ."

"Mina Hoole is a wet!" snarled the Hon. Con. "Far from thumping the living daylights out of La Dwyer, she's not even going to mention anything to her. And she's sworn me to total secrecy!"

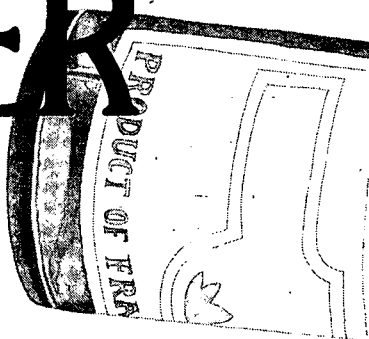
"Well, it's a very Christian attitude, dear, isn't it?"

"Christian, my foot! It's pure selfishness, Bones! Mina Hoole wants to get Bengie to move to Brighton, and she doesn't much care how it's done. If it means poor old Bengie's being framed for a crime he didn't commit—well, too bad. Do you know, she even had the nerve to say that she admired the Dwyer woman for thinking up such a clever scheme—and she's going to give the sister first refusal on the house. It's enough to make a cat sick! Well,"—the Hon. Con squared her shoulders and stuck her jaw out—"that's the last time you'll find *me* extending the paw of friendship!"

She looked round. "Where've you hidden my book on karate, Bones?"

DEAD SOLDIER

by Loren D.
Estleman



Nha Nelson's Oriental face was shaped like an inverted rain-drop, oval with a chin that came to a point. She just crested five feet and ninety pounds in a tight pink sweater and a black skirt that caught her legs just below the knees. Her eyes slanted down from a straight nose and her complexion was more beige than ivory. She was as Vietnamese as a punji stick.

"My name's Amos Walker," I said. "I think we spoke on the telephone about a package I have for Mr. Nelson." I held up the bottle in the paper sack.

"Come in." She pronounced all the consonants.

Carrying my wine like a partygoer, I followed her into a neat living room where two men sat watching television. One rose to grasp my hand. Reed Nelson was my height and age—just six feet and on the wrong side of thirty—but he had football shoulders



Illustration by Julie Hechtlinger

under his checked shirt and wore his brass-colored hair cut very close. His brittle smile died short of his eyes. "My neighbor, Steve Minor."

I nodded to the other man, fortyish and balding, who grunted back but kept his seat. He was watching the Lions lose to Pittsburgh.

"Nha said a private detective called." Nelson's eyes went to the bottle. "It's about the tontine, isn't it?"

I said it was. He asked Steve Minor to excuse him, got another grunt in reply, and we adjourned to a paneled basement. Hunting prints covered the walls. Rifles and handguns occupied two glassed-in display cases and a Browning automatic lay in pieces on a workbench stained with gun oil and crowded with cartridge-loading paraphernalia. My host cleared a stack of paper targets off one of

a pair of crushed-leather armchairs and we sat down.

"Expecting someone?" I asked.

He smiled the halfway smile. "Friend of mine owns a range outside Dearborn. I was a sharpshooter in the army and I'd rather not lose the edge. If I were you I wouldn't smoke; you're sitting on a case of black powder."

I looked down at the edge of a carton stenciled EXPLOSIVE sticking out between the legs of my chair and put away my pack of Winstons.

"David Kurch hired me to find you and deliver the bottle," I said. "He's the lawyer you and the others left it with when you formed the tontine."

"I remember. He was an ARVN then, stationed in Que Noc." Nelson's expression turned in on itself. "And that was only twelve years ago. It's hard to believe they're all dead."

"They are, though. Chuck Dundas stepped on a mine two feet shy of the DMZ in '70. Albert Rule was MIA for seven years and has been declared dead. Fred Burlingame shot himself in New York last year, and Jerry Lynch died of cancer in August." I handed him the bottle. "Congratulations."

He slid it out of the sack, fondled it. "It was bottled in some Frenchman's private vineyard in 1937. Al found it in a ruined cellar near Hue, probably left behind when the French bugged out. The tontine was Fred's idea. The last man left was supposed to get the bottle. Were you over there?"

"Two years."

"Then you know how preoccupied we were with death. But, hell, I'd forgotten all about this till you showed up. When I saw the package I remembered."

I passed him my receipt pad with a pen clipped to it. "If you'll sign this I'll shove off."

He read it swiftly and scribbled his name. "How'd you find me? I just moved to Detroit from the suburbs, and my number's unlisted." He gave back the pad and pen.

"Kurch knew where you worked. I got it from personnel."

"They have a hell of a nerve, after I just got fired."

"They cutting back?"

He moved his head from side to side, but his eyes stayed on me. "They said I was a poor risk from a psychiatric standpoint."

"Are you?"

"You were in Nam. What do you think?"

I let that ride and got up. Crowd noise filtered down from the TV set upstairs. Someone had just made a touchdown. Nelson said, "You drink?"

I sat back down. "Do they make cars in Tokyo?"

This time his smile made it all the way. He turned his head and called, "Nha? Two glasses, please."

"What about your neighbor?" I asked.

"He'll understand. Steve and I aren't all that close. I only invited him over because I knew him slightly in Nam. He introduced me to my wife."

On cue, Nha appeared, set a pair of stemmed glasses down on the workbench, and withdrew. She seemed flushed. Nelson scooped a Swiss Army knife out of a drawer in the bench and used the corkscrew to unstop the bottle. When the glasses were full of dark red liquid, he handed one over and raised his. "Chuck, Al, Fred, and Jerry. Four among the hundred thousand."

We sipped. It was good, but nothing beats twelve-year-old scotch. "Were you married over there?"

He nodded. "She was working in a Saigon orphanage. Grew up there, after her parents were napalmed in '65. You like being a private eye?"

We drank wine and sold each other our biographies. There wasn't much to tell beyond the gaping hole of Vietnam. After an hour or so, the noise upstairs ceased abruptly. Steve Minor had switched off the set. Nelson replaced the cork in the bottle, which was now half empty. "There's another afternoon's drinking in here," he said, rising.

I was already on my feet. "Share it with your wife, or with someone else close."

"She's a teetotaler. And if there were anyone else close, do you think I'd be wasting it on a shamus I don't even know?" His eyes pleaded.

I said I'd call him. Upstairs, Nha saw me out without speaking. Minor had left.

It was three weeks before I made it back. I had spent much of that time following a city councilman's wife from male friend to male friend while her husband was on a junket to Palm Springs. Nelson greeted me at the door, explaining that Nha was out shopping. We killed the bottle in near-silence. He hadn't

found a job and he wasn't talking much. It looked as if the novelty had worn off our relationship. We parted.

The rest of the month died painlessly. The Lions blew a late-season rally just before the playoffs. Snow was on the ground most other places. Detroit's streets were clogged with brown slush. Reed Nelson called me at the office on a Saturday and asked me to meet him somewhere for lunch.

"I've got a job interview in Houston next week," he said when we were sharing a table in my favorite diner, one where the chef wore a shirt and didn't swat flies with his spatula. "Only the bank ate my last unemployment check and the savings account is down to double figures. When I applied for a loan, the manager of my friendly dependable finance company snickered and called in his assistant because he said he needed cheering up."

I blew on a spoonful of steaming chili. "What about old Steve? Army buddies are usually good for a few bucks."

"The hell with him."

I glanced up at Nelson's face. He'd lost weight. His cheeks were shadowed and there were purple thumbprints under his eyes. "How's Nha?" I asked.

"She's fine." The words cracked out like shots from a .22.

We ate. I said, "I'll give you two hundred for the Browning."

He hesitated. "It's not worth that. The trigger mechanism's sloppy and the barrel needs blueing."

"So I'm a lousy businessman. We'll stop at my bank on the way back to the office. I'll come by another time and pick up the gun."

"Thanks, Amos. You ever need anything, just name it."

"Pass the salt."

I returned from a tail job early Monday afternoon. Whoever said travel is broadening never followed a possibly larcenous salesman clear to Toledo and sat up all night in a freezing car. I hadn't eaten since Sunday. Nursing the crick in my neck, I turned on the TV in my living room and lurched into the kitchen to find something to defrost. The volume was too high. The name "Steven Minor" pasted me to the ceiling.

The picture was just blossoming on when I hurried back in. Floodlights illuminated two paramedics sliding a stretcher into the back of an ambulance. The camera cut to a male model in an overcoat standing in front of a house I recognized, a microphone

in one hand. Police flashers throbbed sullenly in the street nearby.

"Police aren't saying yet what may have allegedly caused Nelson to shoot his neighbor and barricade himself in his house. But evidence suggests that the tragedy of Vietnam has just claimed another victim." The model identified himself and his grim face disappeared, to be replaced by a smiling one back at the news desk. I left the set running and got out of there.

John Alderdyce was the lieutenant in charge of the investigation. He spoke to a big sergeant from the Tactical Mobile Unit, who reluctantly let me through the cordon. John's black and has been a friend since childhood, or as much of one as a plastic badge can hope to find among the blue brotherhood. "What's your billing in this?" he demanded when we were inside Nelson's house.

"Friend of the family." I dipped a toe into a red stain on the carpet. It was still fresh, and it wasn't wine. The room was a shambles of overturned furniture and broken crockery. "When did Minor die?"

"He was DOA at Detroit Receiving." Alderdyce's face fluttered. "Damn it, who told you he's dead?"

"Rumor has it you're with Homicide. I'm a detective, too." I fed my face a butt. "What did I miss?"

"Right now it looks like this guy Nelson popped his cap, plugged his neighbor with a .38 auto, then locked himself in, holding his wife hostage. Hostage Negotiations people talked him into surrendering. He's wearing handcuffs in the basement. Vietnam vet, certified psycho, unemployed. They ought to print up a form report for this kind of thing with blanks where we can fill in the names, save on overtime."

"Any witnesses?"

"Don't need 'em. Nelson confessed. We're just waiting for the press to clear out so we can take him downtown and get it on tape. He and Minor were talking downstairs when he flipped. You ought to see that gun room. I guess you have." He nailed me. "Since when are you anybody's friend?"

"Even the garbageman rates a cup of coffee now and then. What's Nha say? That's his wife."

"I met her. Pretty. She was hysterical when I got here. We called her doctor. He just left. She's in the bedroom, under sedation."

I blew smoke. "I wonder how she got along without it when they

burned her parents to death. Can I see Nelson?"

Alderdyce's eyes glittered in narrow slits. "As what? Friend or representative?"

I said friend. He considered, then nodded as if agreeing with himself and started for the basement stairs. I dogged his heels. Drops of blood mottled the steps. I halted.

"Where'd Minor get it?" I asked.


"In the right lung." The lieutenant looked back up at me from the bottom step. "He staggered up the stairs, bounced off some furniture on his way through the living room, and collapsed by the front door. Hospital says he drowned in his own blood. Anything wrong with that?"

"Are you asking that as a friend or a policeman?"

He made a rude noise and resumed moving.

A cop in uniform and a plainclothesman I didn't know were guarding the prisoner, who was sitting in the chair I had occupied on my two visits, manacled wrists dangling between his knees. His shirt was soaked through with sweat. When I entered, he looked up and a tired smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. His features were cadaverous.

"Blow your diminished capacity plea a quick kiss, Nelson," Lieutenant Alderdyce said. "We're going Murder One."



"I used your gun," he said. "Sorry."

"What's he mean, your gun?" snapped Alderdyce.

"Private joke," I explained. "What happened, Reed?"

"They're saying I killed Steve. I was shooting at Charlie."

"Charlie?" Alderdyce's brow puckered.

"Viet Cong." I ditched my cigarette in an ashtray on the workbench. "Shrinks call it Vietnam Flashback. Years after a vet leaves.

the jungle, something triggers his subconscious and he suddenly thinks he's back there surrounded by the enemy. He reacts accordingly."

"Oh yeah, that. As if murderers didn't have enough loopholes to squirt through as it was."

The telephone rang upstairs. Alderdyce jerked his head at the uniform, who went up to answer it.

"It's a legitimate dodge," I said. "Only not in this case, right, Reed? Steve Minor was the target all along."

The uniform's feet on the stairs were very loud in the silence that followed. "It's for you, lieutenant," he said. "The lab."

His superior pointed at me. "Hold that thought." He left us.

Five minutes later he returned. His eyes were very bright. "Blow your diminished capacity plea a quick kiss, Nelson. We're going Murder One."

"The D.A. won't buy it," said the plainclothesman.

"Bet me. The lab found powder burns on Minor's shirt, but guess what? There weren't any around the wound. I called the hospital and checked."

"Proving?" I asked.

"Proving he wasn't wearing it when he was shot. Someone held it up and fired a bullet through it, then put it on him while he was dying upstairs to make us think otherwise. You were at Metro Airport an hour before the shooting, Nelson, and the airline said they never got your reservation on that flight to Houston. Was Minor in bed with your wife when you came home, or had he just had time to take off his shirt?"

The prisoner leaped to his feet but was restrained by the other two officers. He opened his mouth, then closed it. Sat down.

"Neighbors reported only one shot, lieutenant," the plainclothesman pointed out. "And there was just one cartridge gone from the gun."

"They didn't hear the first because it was fired in the basement. And he replaced the shell. He was smart enough to know we'd question a chest wound without a corresponding hole in the shirt, and he was smart enough to make up that psycho story to cover himself. He was also smart enough to solve the spent shell problem. I want a crew here to search every inch of this house until they find where that second bullet went." He looked at me. "You knew Minor was the target. How? Did you know about him and Nelson's

wife?"

"No, and I still don't," I said. "You're zero for two. Nelson never shot anyone. Not in this hemisphere, anyway."

Nelson glanced at me, then away. I continued. "Reed was a sharpshooter over there. Still is; he told me he keeps in practice. There's no way, if he thought Minor were a Viet Cong, that he'd miss the heart at this range and give him a chance to retaliate. And if it was Minor he wanted to kill, he would've made sure his victim didn't hang around long enough to talk. He was shot before Reed got here."

"No! I killed him!" This time the cops were quicker to hold the prisoner in his chair.

"Nelson's car was parked in the driveway when the neighbors heard the gun go off," Alderdyce told me. The skin on his face was drawn so tight it shone blue, as it often did when I was speaking.

"You said yourself it was the second shot they heard," I reminded him. "That one was his, to keep anyone from wondering why Minor didn't have his shirt on in his neighbor's house, and he did it upstairs because he knew it wasn't safe to pull a trigger in the basement with so much black powder lying around. Just one other person could have fired the fatal bullet. Just one other person was in the house at the time." I breathed some air. "What were Nha and Steve Minor to each other back in Vietnam, Reed?"

"Prostitute and pimp."

Alderdyce and I turned. Nha Nelson, barefoot in a Chinese house-dress, her hair down and disheveled, was leaning against the wall at the bottom of the stairwell. Her face was streaked and puffy.

"Don't, Nha," pleaded her husband.

"I should not have let it come this far." She spoke slowly, like a record winding down. The doctor's sedative had furred the fine edge, but she went painfully on. "Minor made money on the side running prostitutes in Saigon," she said. "I was one of six. When his tour ended, he introduced us all to G.I.'s he knew, hoping some of us would marry. He planned to blackmail the husbands later by threatening to tell all their friends and business associates what their wives used to do for a living.

"Reed was an engineer for a large corporation, the perfect victim. But he lost his job just after Minor decided it was his turn. So he blackmailed me, but not for money. He was a depraved man. He said if I did not have sex with him he would tell Reed I lied about

my past. I agreed."

Her eyes filled and ran over. Nelson said her name. She acted as if she hadn't heard. "I love my husband. I was afraid he would leave me if he knew the truth. Minor waited until Reed had left for the airport and then he came over to collect. But I could not do it. I had done it many times, with many men, but that was in Vietnam, before I had Reed. I excused myself while Minor was undressing and came down here for a gun. I wanted only to scare him, to make him leave. He suspected something and followed me. When I heard him on the stairs I panicked. I turned and—" Bitter tears strangled her.

I gave her my handkerchief. She wiped her eyes and nose. Nelson was weeping, too, his face buried in his hands, the chain dangling between the wrists. Quiet rolled in and sat down. Alderdyce booted it out. "Do you have the names of the other five women?"

"Three of them," she said. "The other two didn't marry the men Minor wanted them to. I even know the husbands' names and what cities they lived in. He bragged to me about how he had traveled around the country, all this time, setting up shop wherever a victim was. That's what he called it, 'setting up shop.' He was proud of the life of leisure he'd been able to squeeze from them just short of breaking them."

"We'll talk to them. Compton, take the lady upstairs and let her get dressed. We'll read her her rights when she comes down from that stuff the doc gave her."

The uniform took her elbow gently and steered her around as if she were a sleepy child. Nelson stood.

"Thanks for nothing, Walker."

I said, "I'll be surprised if the D.A. presses charges. If he does, he'll lose."

"So what? I'm going to end up in the nut ward sooner or later. My way it counted for something."

I had nothing to throw at that. The plainclothesman prodded him forward and up the steps.

Alderdyce hung back. He had spotted the empty wine bottle, standing in a back corner of the workbench behind a can of gun stock refinisher. "That looks out of place here. Maybe I should have it dusted."

"Forget it." I picked it up and chucked it into the wastebasket. "Dead soldier."

FICTION

A CLASSIC

by Gary

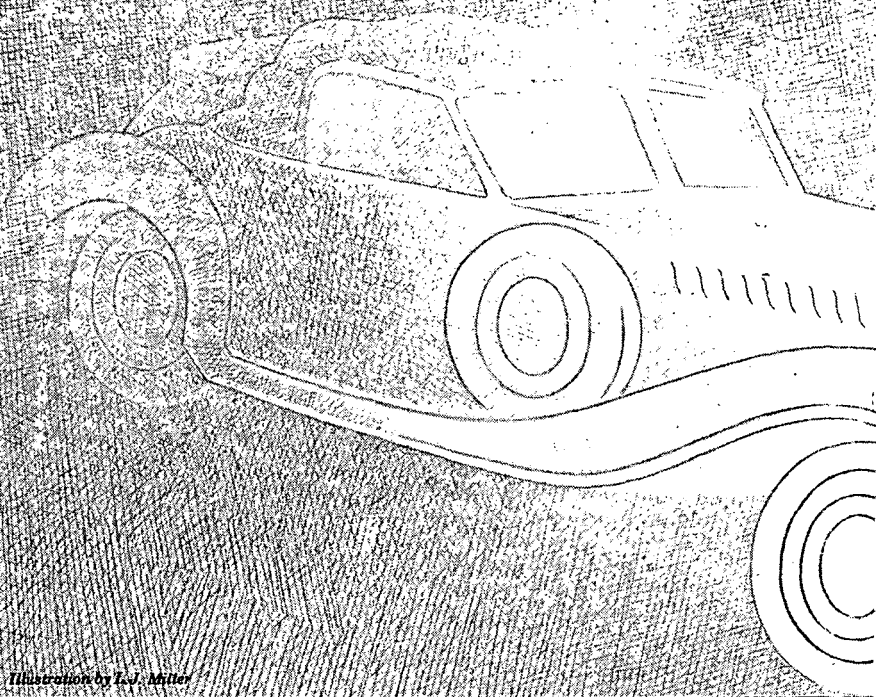
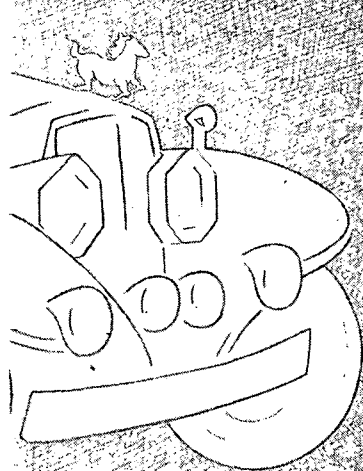


Illustration by L.J. Miller

CASE Alexander



The file folder was on Frank Rambaugh's desk early Monday morning. Freshly created, it was thin as a knife edge. Atop it was a memo in scrawled red: O Me ASAP. O David Oakes, unlike other claims managers Rambaugh had worked for, used red ink with moderation. Rambaugh picked it up and walked into Oakes's office, knowing that whatever was inside would grow and grow.

"Have a chance to look over the report, Frank?"

Oakes was thin, hyperactive,

ten years Rambaugh's junior. His cigarette consumption was in direct proportion to his tension. His ashtray looked like Mount St. Helens.

"Not yet."

"Please do," Oakes said. "A stolen car report."

Rambaugh frowned, gestured to the rows of desks outside. "An auto theft loss? Why me, why not our rookies?"

Rambaugh was Unity Property and Casualty's chief property adjustor. He covered the western states, and his desk drawers sagged with thick files concerning suspicious fire losses and questionable theft claims. Thanks to Rambaugh, more than one former Unity policyholder was off the books, having no means to pay premiums from a prison cell.

"Read it and weep," Oakes said, lighting another cigarette. "This is no Chevy."

Rambaugh scanned it. The policyholder was a Lawrence D. Lowery. Until sometime over the weekend, he had owned a 1934 Hester Silver Phaeton.

"An antique, a classic," Rambaugh said, thinking out loud. "A valuable toy."

David Oakes had pulled Lowery's policy folder, gave it to Rambaugh. "But it's not a Model A restored in somebody's carport, Frank. Not a trinket worth, say, ten grand or so. Read on."

Rambaugh did. There were photographs of the 1934 Hester, a monstrous four-door convertible. Canary yellow, spoked wheels, enough chrome to supply General Motors for a week, sufficient bulk to mount guns on it and defend Inchon. Rambaugh's eyebrows raised as he read three appraisals given by local antique car experts, including one by the president of a local club. They ranged between two hundred and ten and two hundred and eighty thousand dollars, subject, of course, to the vagaries of an auction. One did not consign a Hester Silver Phaeton to Honest Charlie's Used Cars.

"I've heard of astronomical prices for antique cars, but why this one?" Rambaugh asked.

"Only three were built altogether and this is the sole survivor. I've done some checking," Oakes said. "The Hester Company had heads of state in mind as their market. Hitler and Mussolini nibbled, as did the King of England, but they cancelled their orders. Nationalism being what it was, they went with their own products. Mercedes and Rolls Royce and whatever the Italians sold to the upper crust. They say the Hester was the finest piece of coachwork and running gear in the world and practically no one could afford the asking price

with the Depression and all. Our robber barons weren't interested. Hester sold them at a loss and went belly-up."

Rambaugh sighed, took off his glasses, and cleaned them with his tie. "David, how did Unity become involved with such a ludicrous risk?"

Oakes shrugged and lit another cigarette. "Sales wrote the business and Underwriting okayed it. Nice premium, though."

"Sales and Underwriting," Rambaugh muttered. "Greed and Incompetence. The Fifth and Sixth Horsemen."

"Frank, the stallion has already bugged out of the corral. No waves, *please*. And keep away from Lee. What's done is done."

Lee Smyth was Unity's sales manager. A year ago, after an ex-con policyholder had torched his tavern, Rambaugh marched into Smyth's office and had, among other things, called him a prostitute. Waves were still pounding the shore on that one.

Frank Rambaugh stood up. "Find it," Oakes said. "It's a standard auto policy. If the Hester doesn't show in thirty days, we pay."

Lawrence D. Lowery lived in an affluent suburb east of town, a hilly area of competitive emerald lawns and

the kind of architecture Rambaugh thought of as Twenty-first Century Gothic.

Rambaugh was a large man with a midlife overhang. He wore conservative suits, white shirts, and a hat. He carried a leather briefcase that had seen better days. It was the uniform of the insurance man when he had broken into the field twenty-five years earlier, and Rambaugh saw no reason to alter his dress code for the times.

Lawrence Lowery, on the other hand, was wiry and tanned. He wore a fashionable jogging suit and expensive sneakers. A real trendy sort, Rambaugh thought; little chance for rapport here. Rambaugh considered jogging a perversion.

"Good of you to get out so fast," Lowery said after they shook hands.

Rambaugh unzipped his briefcase. "The report is sketchy, Mr. Lowery. When do you think it happened?"

"Sometime between Saturday morning and Sunday evening. We were boating with friends this weekend, spent the night up the Sound at their cabin."

"Enjoyable, no doubt," Rambaugh said, taking notes. "Where was the Hester kept?"

Lowery led Rambaugh outside into the driveway, then

flicked his handheld garage door opener. Both doors rotated upward. One bay had been converted into a workshop, with bench, hanging tools, and various containers. In the other, all that remained of the Hester was a sludgy black spot on the concrete floor.

"Did you drive it regularly?" Rambaugh asked.

"Oh no. I'd just finished restoration. I planned to exhibit it a few times then put it up for auction."

Rambaugh pointed at an aging Volkswagen van parked outside. "And that's your transportation?"

"Yes. Wish I had room for it in the garage. The paint's getting—well, I guess I do now."

"Tell me about the restoration project," Rambaugh said.

"It's a hobby I've had since I was a kid. I started with a junked MG I bought for a hundred bucks. Did what I could myself, farmed out the rest to shops, then sold it and bought another and another, moving up in scarcity and value until I was able to acquire the Hester."

"Buy low, put in some sweat equity, and sell high?"

"Helluvan investment," Lowery said. "Beats money markets and Krugerrands hands down if you're good with tools."

"And you are."

"I am."

Rambaugh tried to read the man. He knew that pet owners often confused their animals with human beings. The same applied to car buffs who had an unusual affection for their machinery. Just last year, a Unity policyholder who wrecked his Porsche had flowers sent to it at the body shop. "Just an investment?"

"An investment," Lowery repeated without emotion.

"I understand this was the last Hester."

"True. One had been sold to a Belgian count. It was destroyed in an Allied bombing raid during World War Two. The second belonged to a steel executive. There was a fire. I got mine from a collector who wrote it off as hopeless. Traded him straight across for a Bugatti—I'd just finished."

"But it wasn't hopeless?"

"Not for me," Lowery said proudly. "The parts I couldn't salvage I fabricated myself or had it done."

Rambaugh sniffed. "What's that smell? Chemicals of some sort?"

"Solvents probably. I'm used to it. There's a lot of cleaning and stripping involved with old cars."

Rambaugh walked outside and Lowery followed. Around the property were hedges, high

fences, and trees. "I don't imagine the neighbors saw anything."

Lowery shook his head. "No. The policemen and the detective who came out checked. The privacy we have in the neighborhood works against us. Several large burglaries in the past year."

"I wonder how they got in," Rambaugh said, glancing at the house. "I see no signs of forcible entry offhand."

"Neither did the police," Lowery said. "They also pointed out that the pros could break into anything without leaving a mark."

"Indeed," Rambaugh said. "What do you do for a living, Mr. Lowery?"

"Investment counselor," he answered, his voice rising slightly with annoyance. "My own store, one entire floor in the Wellbeck Building. Fast lane all the way. How's Unity's retirement plan, incidentally? I could slip you into a dynamite IRA and you wouldn't feel a bit of pain."

"Is business good, Mr. Lowery? The economy being what it is, with interest rates and—"

"Yes!"

"Happily married? Divorce lawyers can be real barracudas when they discover that the other party is as affluent as—"

"Yes. Am I being accused? I

gather I'm—what do you call it—a prime suspect?"

It was the spring, so Lowery's tan must have been acquired in Hawaii or Mazatlán or some such locale. But now it was going crimson. Rambaugh had always found the generation of anger and stress useful to a point.

Rambaugh smiled warmly. "Initial frankness, I feel, is productive in these matters. Clears the proverbial air at the outset. Either you contrived this loss or it is legitimate. Once that question is resolved, we can venture forth in a spirit of cooperation and mutual purpose."

"I can appreciate that," Lowery said sourly.

"A puzzlement, however. Who on earth would steal a Hester? Your basic car thief is either an acned joyrider or a pro who delivers per order to a chop shop, where the product is carved up like a Thanksgiving turkey. But a Hester, I would think, is akin to the *Mona Lisa*. Unique and conspicuous. A three ton *Mona Lisa*, hardly attractive to a fence."

"It happens," Lowery said. "It's happened to others in the local classic car community. Maybe rich Arabs are the buyers. I don't know."

"Neither do I," Rambaugh said.

"Has the proverbial air been

cleared?" Lowery demanded.

Rambaugh smiled again. "Hopefully soon, Mr. Lowery."

"I want my car or I want my money, Rambaugh."

"Thirty days on the latter, Mr. Lowery."

After Lowery had slammed the front door behind himself, Rambaugh walked to his car, pausing first at the policyholder's battered VW van. The rear seats were out and the carpeting was a greasy mess. An anomaly, he thought. A priceless motor car, spiffy to the last nut and bolt; an indifferently-maintained junker. Yes, it was inconsistent, but Rambaugh drove away without a glimmer why.

Rambaugh stopped at the office long enough to dictate a preliminary report and order a detailed credit check on Lawrence D. Lowery. Then he caught his flight to Boise, where he testified for the next two days at the criminal trial of an pharmacist insured by Unity, who had suffered an alleged burglary of drugs just prior to a routine controlled-substances audit. Rambaugh had denied the claim and the enraged druggist had threatened a civil action after he was vindicated of the charge.

He was not vindicated. Rambaugh's testimony was crucial,

and a number of conflicting statements by the policyholder were revealed. The jury was out only ninety minutes.

He called Oakes from the Boise airport and passed on the good news. Oakes congratulated Rambaugh, and asked why the hell he had called Lawrence D. Lowery a crook.

Rambaugh ignored the question and asked Oakes if the credit report had come in.

Oakes sighed, and Rambaugh heard his cigarette lighter click. "He's a little shaky but not at the edge yet. A couple of minor complaints have been filed recently with the attorney general and the SEC."

"What manner of complaints?"

"Churning the accounts."

"Churning?"

"It's stock market slang for excessive buying and selling. Every time you make a transaction, you get a commission."

"Desperate for revenue, cash flow, eh?"

"No, Frank. They say that it's the most common gripe with these firms, and Lowery and Company is no worse than the rest. And getting back to the subject, if you did not call Lowery a crook, why do I have a letter in front of me from the state insurance commissioner? They wish a reply within forty-eight hours, Frank."

"They do a fine job, David. Very conscientious in looking after the rights of the citizens of this state."

"Frank!"

"I'd never use that kind of terminology, despite the fact that it's true. Lowery did it, David. I know he did."

A sigh, another click. "Can you prove it?"

"Not yet."

"Until you can, you have a mess to clean up. When does your plane arrive?"

"Around nightfall."

"Good. Please drive from the airport to the Lowerys'. It's best that you deal with this as soon as possible."

"I'd be delighted, David. I have a smattering of after-thoughts I'd like to deal with. That garage, David, it—"

"Public relations, not Sherlock Holmes!" Oakes said.

"Indeed," Rambaugh said to a dead receiver.

Gigi Lowery was seated on a couch with Lawrence. She was as bronzed and attractive and robust as her husband. The weather in Rambaugh's, two day absence had been unseasonably kind to outdoorsy types. Gigi was dressed in a tennis outfit. The very thought of such a strenuous and futile activity made Rambaugh queasy.

The Lowerys were holding hands. Authenticating their marital bliss for my benefit, Rambaugh thought.

"I'm sorry if it seemed that I overreacted," Lowery said.

"No harm. The insurance commissioner is often a useful mediator," Rambaugh said.

"Larry put so much work into that car, Mr. Rambaugh," Gigi said. "This has us on edge."

"Understandable," Rambaugh said.

"It's the car I want, not the money," Lowery said. "Those appraisals might even be on the low side. Auctions are unpredictable."

"As you know, I've been out of town," Rambaugh said. "Do the police have any developments?"

"Larry calls them every day," Gigi Lowery said. "Nothing. Not a clue."

She was lying, Rambaugh knew. True, there had been no developments; Rambaugh himself called the detective in charge twice daily, even from Boise. The detective had reported that the Lowerys had made no inquiries. Lies begat lies, Rambaugh thought, and the first one was often the key. He felt better about his suspicions.

"Could we take one more look in the garage?" Rambaugh asked, getting up.

"Sure," Lowery said, without enthusiasm. In the garage, he asked, "What are you looking for?"

"Signs of forcible entry," Rambaugh said. "Even the best police officers can overlook something."

"Well?"

"Not that I notice. Thank you for your time, Mr. Lowery, and, again, my apologies for the misunderstanding."

Frank Rambaugh drove home, not at all guilty about his own lie. One falsehood deserved another, he believed. He had gone into the garage not to look, but to smell.

Lyle Hayes had written one of the three appraisals on the 1934 Hester Silver Phaeton. Hayes, a ruddy man in coveralls, owned a small business that repaired and sold classic cars. He was also president of one of the local antique automobile clubs.

Hayes was sanding the hood of a early-model Ferrari when Rambaugh introduced himself.

"Sure, I remember Lowery's Hester," Hayes said. "Who could forget it?"

"I saw the photos of the Hester," Rambaugh said. "I'd judge that the man is a pretty fair craftsman."

"You're right," Hayes said. "He does what he has to do to

get a machine in order."

"Workmanlike and professional, but performed without love?"

Hayes paused a moment. "Yeah, I guess you could say he's different from the rest of us in that respect. Larry's a bottom-line guy."

"You supplied the highest appraisal, Mr. Hayes. Two hundred and eighty thousand. You're absolutely certain that the car would bring that amount?"

"Maybe more," Hayes said.

"Authentic to the last piece? Right down to the ashtray? I hear tell that the need to substitute non-stock parts will reduce an antique car's value considerably. Like putting Formica on a Chippendale."

Lyle Hayes nodded. "Yes, from what I could tell from the photos."

"From the *photos*?" Rambaugh asked, his eyes widening. "You gave an appraisal in excess of a quarter million dollars without actually inspecting the car?"

Hayes flushed, intimidated by Rambaugh's tone. "Larry needed it in a hurry for his insurance. It was raining that day and he still had a couple of leaks at the edges of the convertible top. I'd seen it before. Several times."

"In what state of restora-

tion?" Rambaugh asked.

"Early. It was in sad shape. Rust, battered body, frozen-up engine, you name it. Larry'd traded a real sharp Caddy Phaeton for it. He wouldn't have given it up unless he was confident he could do the Hester."

"Wait a minute," Rambaugh said, digging through his briefcase. He located the notes he'd taken at his initial meeting with Lowery. The policyholder, he saw, had stated that he'd traded a Bugatti for the Hester.

"I don't know much about old cars," Rambaugh went on. "What can you tell me about a Bugatti?"

"Small, sporty, unique front-end treatment. Valuable, rare."

"And a Cadillac Phaeton?"

"That's interesting," Hayes said. "It was of the same vintage as the Hester, but not nearly as rare. It would take a practiced eye to pick which was which from a distance. In fact, the coachwork is identical. Hester, if I recall, bought surplus tooling from Cadillac."

"Indeed," Rambaugh said, scribbling furiously.

He thanked Hayes for his trouble and contacted the two other appraisers. One was an out-of-town auctioneer he reached by phone. The second was a local antique car aficionado who, like Lowery, tinkered

in his garage.

Both men sheepishly admitted that their appraisals were rendered on the basis of photographs. Excellent photographs, they added defensively. They were as confident of Lowery's technical ability as Hayes had been.

A weary Frank Rambaugh returned to his office.

"Are you and the Lowerys at peace?" David Oakes asked.

Rambaugh fluttered a hand. "Temporary ceasefire."

"Any new developments?"

"I'm afraid they're still in the slanderous stage. Has Vinson been in yet?"

"Speaking of the devil," Oakes said, pointing behind Rambaugh.

Ernie Vinson had just sat down at his desk. He was Rambaugh's age, a former body and fender man, Unity's automobile damage inspector.

Rambaugh walked over to him. "Doing any field work today? And if so, how would you like some company?"

"Give me ten minutes to return phone calls and we're off. But why? You've suddenly become curious about honest hard work? You're feeling guilty for all the years you've spent on the gravy train?"

This form of repartee had

gone on for the ten years they had worked in the same office.

"There are rumors, Ernie, that when you leave the office for the field, you go into the parking garage and sleep in your car. I've been asked to investigate the charge."

"I'm always willing to teach anyone who wants to learn. But aren't fender-benders a little out of your realm?"

"We are, I assume, after your nap, traveling to various auto body shops," Rambaugh said.

"We are," Ernie said. "What do you want to see?"

"Actually, it's what I want to smell."

Ernie Vinson rolled his eyes. "Addicted to automotive paint fumes, are you? The phone calls can wait. Let's go."

Rambaugh entered the offices of Lowery and Company and asked to see Mr. Lowery. Although he did not have an appointment, he was ushered in. Lowery wore a three-piece pinstripe and an expression of surprise. The windows in his corner office provided a magnificent view of the city.

"I am here to tender settlement," Rambaugh said, swooshing into a chair of chrome and leather.

"I thought there was a thirty day clause," Lowery said. "I didn't expect—"

"There is."

"Yeah, what the hell. My Hester is probably in Saudi Arabia by now. Or Brazil. Great. Unity is tops. That's why I went with them. Coverage on my home and business, too. No dragging your feet, right? The Hester's gone and you want to wrap it up."

Rambaugh was paying no attention, absorbed in removing an untidy stack of notes from his briefcase. He wiped his glasses on his suit jacket, put them on, and began. "Just a few tiny details first, Mr. Lowery. That dirty oil spot on your garage floor. A fresh oil spot. It seemed to me inconsistent with the priceless car above it. Filthy, filthy sludge. In the crankcase of one of the most costly cars in the world? Why, my company car, a year-old Mercury—I have it changed every five thousand miles. It has been said that one could eat off the engine block of a connoisseur's classic auto."

"It was an old spot," Lowery said. "I probably had my Vee-Dub in there once or twice when the Hester was outside. That thing leaks like a sieve."

"It was fresh," Rambaugh stated, sorting papers. "And the dominant odor in your garage—"

"Like I explained, solvents."

Rambaugh looked up. "Your nose is growing, Mr. Lowery. I took an informative tour with

a colleague. I detected that same odor in a body shop whose customers are mostly owners of Chevrolet Corvettes and other vehicles constructed of plastic, of fiberglass. The use of fiberglass in body panels is relatively recent, not a technology available to Mr. Hester and his doomed venture. That resin essential to the process is unmistakable.

"A closer scrutiny of your garage would perhaps reveal the existence of plaster dust. No amount of vacuuming could remove it all. Plaster of paris to make molds of the doors and hood and fenders of the Cadillac Phaeton you traded for the Hester.

"You knew the Hester was in such a sorry state that restoration was hopeless. You made the molds on the Caddy, obtained the Hester, removed the crinkled sheet metal, and formed fiberglass replacements. An admirable job. Those photographs are lovely, but anyone in the business would have spotted it as a fake in a minute. If they'd seen it up close, that is. A nice and cute replica worth—oh, say, a tenth of the genuine article."

Lowery forced a laugh. "I always knew Unity was cheap. They'll do anything to avoid paying a claim. I should have listened to friends who advised me to take coverage elsewhere.

But this is extremely thin, Rambaugh. I'll see you in court."

Rambaugh adjusted his glasses. "Your admission that the Volkswagen van had been in the garage is no doubt true. That is a wide two-car garage you have. Move some of your tools and whatever to a side and there would be ample room to back in the van and load it with parts from the Hester. The Hester didn't vanish over that weekend. It went out chunk by chunk. When the dissection was completed, you called us."

"Preposterous!" Lowery said. "Do I look like I need the money?"

"These are difficult times, Mr. Lowery. Prosperity is fragile." Rambaugh gestured at Lowery's office and his splendid view. "Your overhead—my God, man, it's oppressive! I came in and passed *two* people making coffee. Productivity is essential and the complaints of your firm's churning accounts are recent. Two or three consecutively bad months and there'll be folks in white overalls disconnecting telephones and removing furniture.

"Giving you the benefit of the doubt, I'll theorize that you had honorable intentions in the beginning. Those plaster molds were, as you would say, leverage. But you soon realized you were in over your head and took

your best shot. After all, when you learned that a panel on the Hester could not be salvaged, you couldn't pick up the phone and call the parts department of your nearest Hester dealer, could you?"

"A telephone is a handy device," Lowery said, picking up his. "I can have building security people up here in five minutes to remove you. By force if necessary. The insurance commissioner is also only seven pushes distant. Should have taken me up on an IRA, Rambaugh. Unity's retirement plan will do you no good if you're out on the street. And at your age, prospects—"

"You might also contact the police. I've discussed what you term 'preposterous' with them. A search warrant for your chic home and that grungy van could be prepared quickly. We've also alerted wrecking yards and dumps." Rambaugh stood up. "I detest violence. I will leave voluntarily, thank you. Until then."

"Wait a second," Lowery said. "How can we resolve this amicably?"

"Forget that you and I and Unity ever met."

"No claim?"

"No claim," Rambaugh repeated. "If you think I'm sweet

now, wait until I've spent company money on Brooklyn Bridge shares and have been asked to recover it."

"The spirit of compromise?"

"Not today, I'm afraid."

"The cops?"

"A personal problem, Mr. Lowery. Are we on the same wave-length? Vengeance is not mine, sayeth Frank Rambaugh."

Lowery was tapping a pencil on his desktop, not looking at Rambaugh. "I have an appointment. If there's nothing else—"

"Indeed," Rambaugh said.

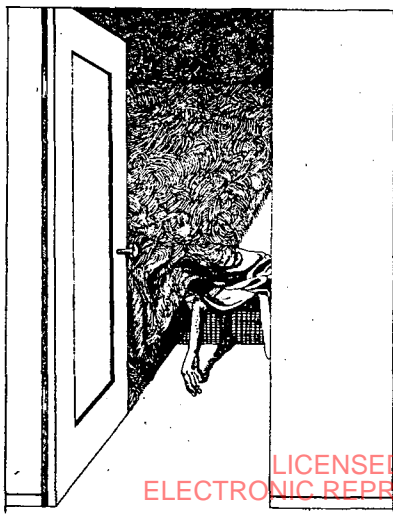
As Rambaugh left he noticed that the two clerks who had activated the coffee machine were standing idly by, watching it percolate. Overhead, he thought. Overhead, lack of productivity, and lies. That dismal troika would kill a going concern faster than any economic disaster promulgated by Washington, D.C. Then, alas, desperate and insurable solutions would venture forth.

Lies. Rambaugh's conscience was still intact. Give and take. Law enforcement personnel, he knew, would not act on such flimsy assertions. But Lawrence D. Lowery didn't.

Rambaugh uncrossed his fingers and fumbled for his car keys.

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

by Willie Rose



The boat-tailed grackles squawked and rowed themselves in silhouette across the sky. Iguanas scrambled among the spiders and ate wild figs on the roof tiles. Most other wild creatures had sought the shade of the jungle long before.

It was a morning like any other at El Pirata hotel. As good a day to die as any other.

Lupe bent again to her mop-

Illustration by Ken Burroughs

ping. It was already hot. She was naked under the loose dress, but all her skin was damp. Moisture collected under her braids, and she could feel droplets course down her thin ribs.

She sloshed the gray rags up and down, then wrung them out with almost transparent fingers. The tiles of the veranda looked shiny as she wet them, but when they dried they took on the same dull, dusty look as before.

She, too, would keep her dull and dusty look, for a time.

She flicked away a two-inch cockroach, sloshed her rags again, and almost smiled.

"Lupe!"

She finished her job hurriedly and dumped the sandy water into the geraniums. The señora was at the door of the dining room, holding a tray.

"Breakfast, Number Seven."

Lupe dried her hands on her thin maid's dress and took the tray.

Number Seven was a single room opening off the veranda. From habit Lupe stood in the doorway, knowing that the man's eyes would be fixed in her direction. Deliberately she waited for the eyes to trace the narrow silhouette of her body against the bright background of the veranda.

She went to the bedside table and put down the tray that she had balanced on the fingers of one hand. She knelt on the floor and said, "Breakfast?"

The sick man's eyes never left her. They followed the line of her throat, her cheek, sought the neck of her faded dress.

"I figured it out. You're the only one here who knew," he whispered. His breath smelled of rot. "I thought . . . delayed after-effect. Weeks I worked . . . for a cure. Never thought . . . And all the time—" Still there was more of wonder than of fear in his voice.

"No talk. You be all right. Eat now."

But the wild blue eyes stared at her and he gasped, "All this time. I threw it away. But you . . ." She thought his strength was gone, but the words struggled out, "You had some. Why? Why, Lupe. . . ?"

She unclenched the thin fingers from around her wrist and moved away. The eyes faded and closed, sinking far into the bloodless face.

"You be fine," she said from the doorway. She almost smiled.

The plump doctor came in the evening, and afterwards the husky police chief, and strong men carried the body away. Lupe, dull and

insignificant, watched from her dusting.

Two days later, the señora stood waiting as Lupe finished scrubbing the kitchen pots. The señora wore her blue satin dress, her hands barely clasping across her stomach.

"The dead señor's brother is here," she hissed. Then she raised her voice to someone outside, "I bring her." She signaled to the girl with a toss of her glossy head.

They went to the office and the door shut out the señora's proud figure. One of Lupe's bare feet shifted to rest on top of the other. The American was almost as fat as his brother once had been, but his eyes did not caress. His creamy trousers stretched into wrinkles at the crotch and his sweaty neck rolled over his shirt collar. The señora's swivel chair creaked under him.

"You're Lupe?"

"Sí, señor."

"How old are you?"

"Soon fifteen, señor."

The man's eyes bulged. "I thought Jake had a crush on some maid here named Lupe. Must have been reading him wrong. He never said anything about a goddamn little kid."

He continued to stare at her. "Doctors can't figure out what killed my brother."

Lupe stared back in silence.

"Shock to see him. Been big all his life. Doc says it looks like he starved to death."

Lupe did not speak.

"You took him his food?"

She nodded.

"They say he was a big eater. Up until the last. Never would let a doctor near him."

He leaned back in the chair and tapped his shoes on the floor. "Okay, I'll level with you. You knew why he was here?"

Lupe blinked.

"Research. He was a diet specialist. You were in and out of his room. He must have left notes, chemicals, stuff like that." His feet slapped flat on the floor as he leaned forward, staring hard. His voice raised to a shout. "What happened to it all?"

Lupe shrank back and shook her head.

"My god! Idiots! What I have to put up with in this heat." He wiped his red forehead on his sleeve.

He tried again in a gentler tone. "Something about orchids. En-

zymes and stuff. He wrote about some kind of white powder, takes the value out of food, you know?"

After a pause he said, "No, I guess you wouldn't know. He wrote nearly three months ago he'd tried it on himself. Swore me to keep it under my hat, how it'd made him lean as a teenager. He was coming home to patent it, but kept trying to get through to some chick who wouldn't give him the time of day. Kept hanging around. Too long, I guess."

Lupe shrugged. She didn't raise her eyes higher than the man's feet.

He mused, "Well, I guess it would be like Jake to destroy all the stuff, and all his notes, and keep the formula in his head. Secretive bastard."

Silence.

"Cripes, it's hot. And you *no comprendo*, right? Well, look. That stuff, if Jake really found it, would be worth a fortune. If I could get my hands on the least little bit of it—it could be analyzed, you understand? I mean, I only sell tires, but I know a thing or two. I'd split with you. Be damn happy to."

Lupe started, remembering something, but he didn't notice. She relaxed when she heard the whining note come into his voice.

"How about it, huh?"

He slapped his knee and got up. "Cripes," he said. "It was too good to be true anyway. Say, you wouldn't know anything about Jake's car, would you? Stripped to a shell night before last. Cripes, he'd never have let anyone touch that car as long as he was alive."

He mopped his head and said, "Okay, Mona Lisa, so I've been talking to myself. Tell the señora to get me a cab. It's too damn hot. Old Jake oughtn't to be kept waiting."

She gave the señora the message, then slipped into the mop closet off the veranda. She quickly found the salt shaker with the bent lid. The last trace of the powder was sloshed down the drain in an instant, and in a minute her little brothers and sisters were playing with the bottle in the dust by the wall.

The American threw his suitcase into the trunk of the taxi and he and the driver climbed into the front seat. Lupe caught a broad wink from her big brother Ramón as he started the taxi and drove away.

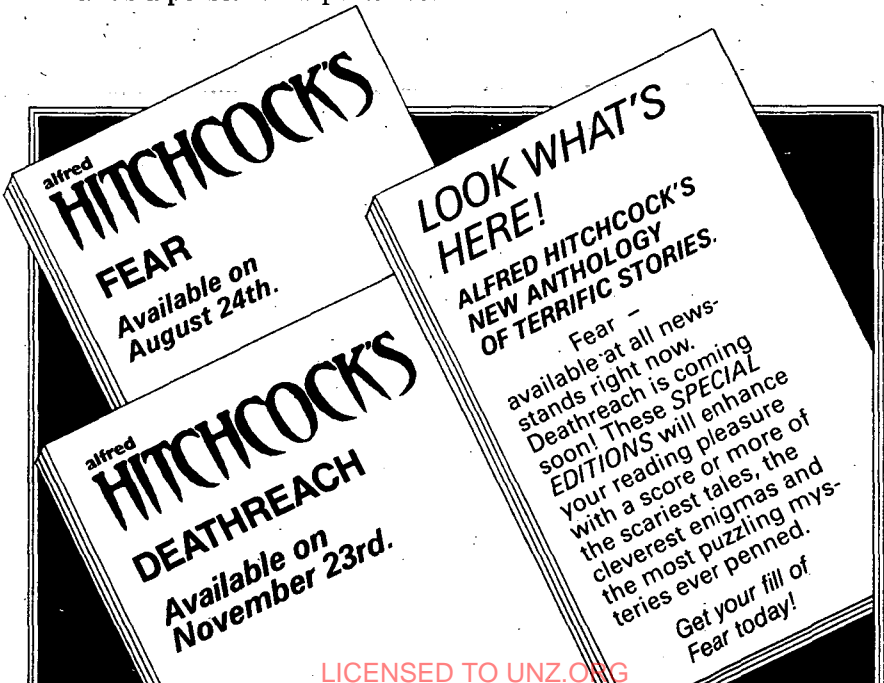
They would reach the airport with no delay. There was little traffic from the faded resort, and Ramon's was the only taxi. The

taxi's cheap paint and lovingly straightened dents nearly concealed its origin in the junkyard. And it had a new engine, and new tires, and there were plenty of spare parts at home.

Lupe dried the insides of her elbows against her skirt and turned back to her cleaning. Stupid foreigner, with his stupid talk of money, trying to make her betray herself! As though anyone on earth would give money for a powder to make food not food! He must have thought her very dull, to tell such a tale.

Then she forgot about him, and his brother, too, as she struggled with dirty sheets in the laundry. Her heart lifted as she thought of the money Ramon would now add to her own little pay. They would buy meat, and milk, and beans, and heaps and heaps of tortillas. She and Ramon and all the little brothers and sisters would eat and eat, all they wanted, every day. They would buy clothes, and a flower for Mama's grave, and even—she trembled to think of it—ice cream!

Lupe's hip bone was sharp under her skin, but soon she would stand proudly, a blue satin dress stretched across the soft, prosperous folds of her stomach. Fat as the fat grackles and iguanas; fat as a person of importance.



CASES ON FILE

The Disappearing Books

by *Katharine Kyes Leab*

The Grete Herball

*whiche groweth partlye knowlege and vnder
standing of all maner of herbes & there greynous vertues whiche god hath
suborned for our profitnes to ease and heathen they bele & cure all maner
of diseases and herules that fall o myghtyng to all maner of creatures
of god created partlye by many expert and wyse maysters as Avicenna
et al. &c. Also it groweth full partlye vnderstandinge of the booke laste pte
byd by me. Peter Treuerus named the noble experts of the vertuous hand
to the offspray.*



The theft of rare books and manuscripts has become big business. In 1981, more than six million dollars' worth of books and manuscripts were stolen in the United States alone. As this article is being written, major book thieves are awaiting trial in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, with warrants out in several other states.

Some thieves, for example kleptomaniacs, are hard to catch. Kleptomaniacs nearly always stash the books they

take in the bedroom—probably under the bed—where they remain untouched. But the law is on the trail of all types of book thieves.

The thief who steals for profit is the most masterly and dangerous of all. For one thing, he is both knowledgeable and ingenious. He knows very well, for instance, how to use such ordinary supplies as scissors, shoe polish, and the Xerox machine to obscure the origins of his wares, and he quickly learns which books can be both stolen

Above: The title page of The Grete Herball, the first illustrated book on plants in the English language, printed in London in 1526.

and sold with ease.

Old illustrated travel books fall into that category, as do bird and wildlife plate books like the famous Audubon folio of bird engravings, or botanical books. Most of these have lovely hand colored engravings, and such books are often broken up and sold piecemeal to print dealers and interior decorators. In the early 1970's, Edward S. Curtis's twenty-volume photographic portfolio *The North American Indian*, published between 1907 and 1930, would have cost about \$2,000. By 1977, because old photographs had become the rage and Curtis's were fine ones, a set of *The North American Indian* sold for \$60,000. Small wonder that at least two sets are missing.

The techniques used by professional book thieves are as varied as the books they steal. One fellow who was working Pennsylvania and Ohio used to convince librarians that his firm would microfilm expensive works to save wear and tear on them and to help insurance companies identify them. He took the books away, filmed them, returned the films, and kept the books. Another thief stole expensive travel books and old botanical books in California, hopped on a plane to Germany, and sold the books there, at auction. A third des-

picable character became an expert in the restoration of books, which meant he could remove all traces of library ownership. Then there was the thief with the portable metal detector. He knew about the practice libraries have of inserting metal tapes in the bindings of old books: an alarm will sound if anyone tries to remove them from the building. But this thief knew in advance what could be safely smuggled out and what couldn't. Another wily fellow, who burgled more than one hundred volumes of a rare botanical magazine (altogether worth about \$20,000) from a midwestern library, had sophisticated electronic equipment to reveal the presence and placement of any sensors connected to the alarm system. All of the thieves described above, we're glad to say, have been caught and taken out of business.

The person who steals for profit usually preys on libraries, archives, government or business files, or bookshops. Their employees account for about thirty-five percent of thefts for profit, sad to say. In the past year, the newspapers have carried stories about documents signed by Presidents Reagan and Carter that were stolen from congressional files and sold by government em-

ployees to autograph dealers, as well as items about university maintenance men taking expensive art books from faculty offices.

Most of the remaining sixty-five percent of these thieves pose as researchers or collectors, and librarians have learned the hard way that impeccable credentials or a twenty-year acquaintance are not by themselves evidence of honesty. Thomas J. Wise, one of the most eminent English collector-bibliographers of the 1920's and 1930's was at last unmasked as the foremost literary forger in this century. He also cut leaves out of rare books in the British Museum, where he had reading privileges; no one discovered this until after his death, when his private collection ended up back at the British Museum, and the staff found the missing leaves inserted in Wise's own copies. Monks using the Yale Library in the 1960's turned out to be not monks at all: the only habit they could legitimately claim was that of leaving the library with expensive volumes of maps and other works tucked under their robes. This was no mean feat: the books they stole were very large volumes, among them portions of the Blaeu atlas, which is a multi-volume work, the most important collection of maps

printed in the 1600's, containing hundreds of carefully engraved and meticulously hand colored maps. A towering, bulky collector-dealer of the 1970's, well known to librarians and booksellers alike, systematically stripped libraries across the country of hundreds of valuable books. He was finally spotted by an alert librarian in Allentown, Pennsylvania, who contacted the FBI. When they picked him up, they also found sixteen trunks of books stashed in a nearby warehouse.

Until recently, library security ended at the front door of the building. The thief who reached the street with a book was as good as home free. Before the 1980's, there was no central place to report a theft. Various newsletters and columns sprang up, but by the time information about thefts was sent in, printed, and distributed, the books were long gone. And no one could expect a bookseller to plow through several hundred issues of a journal to check the theft reports every time a hundred-dollar book was offered him by a stranger.

Furthermore, academic administrators became a large part of the problem, for many of them actively discouraged librarians from reporting thefts in the first place. They were

afraid that such publicity was bad for the institution: donors to the libraries were likely to assume that the librarians had been lax and thus stop donating. Professional thieves knew all about that attitude, of course; if nothing were reported missing the first time they had come to call, they could steal from that library again, and they did.

The hush-hush attitude of academic administrators also created a whale of a problem for the antiquarian bookseller. If a bookseller has bought a stolen book that is later reclaimed by its rightful owner, he loses his money. As thefts of library books with no obvious markings increased, many honest booksellers began to suffer from such claims. Some even began to take the position that unreported property was abandoned property.

The problem was made worse by perfunctory prosecution, and by juries who took crimes against civilization much less seriously than other kinds of crime. Few of them realized that many of these books are like endangered animals: if the books are stolen and broken up, to be sold engraving by engraving, they simply disappear.

Administrators of libraries are, however, beginning to realize that the most effective

way to discourage future thieves is to prosecute the ones who are caught with passion and publicity. They are being pushed along this path of righteousness by the insistence of insurance companies and the prodding of such law enforcement agencies as the FBI and the U.S. Customs Service.

Then there is BAMBAM. BAMBAM stands for Bookline Alert: Missing Books and Manuscripts, and it has been in operation since this past January. It is a nonprofit data base headquartered in New York; subscribers, be they librarians, booksellers, or collectors, can notify the world of a theft almost instantly by telephoning BAMBAM or by typing in a description of the lost item on their own computer terminals. Should a suspicious item be offered for sale, booksellers or collectors can find out if it has been stolen by the same means, as long as they provide BAMBAM with their access code and password. And if it has been, the police, or the FBI, or the U.S. Customs Service, can be notified and the thief apprehended when he tries to consummate the sale.

The computer, moreover, is faster than the airplane, and the flying thief can't get beyond its reach unless he hitches a

ride on the space shuttle. The people who established BAM-BAM are now also making efforts to establish an international registry of library markings which they hope

will be administered by UNESCO. That way, the cultural heritage of all countries and all languages, preserved in book form, will be protected for the next generation.

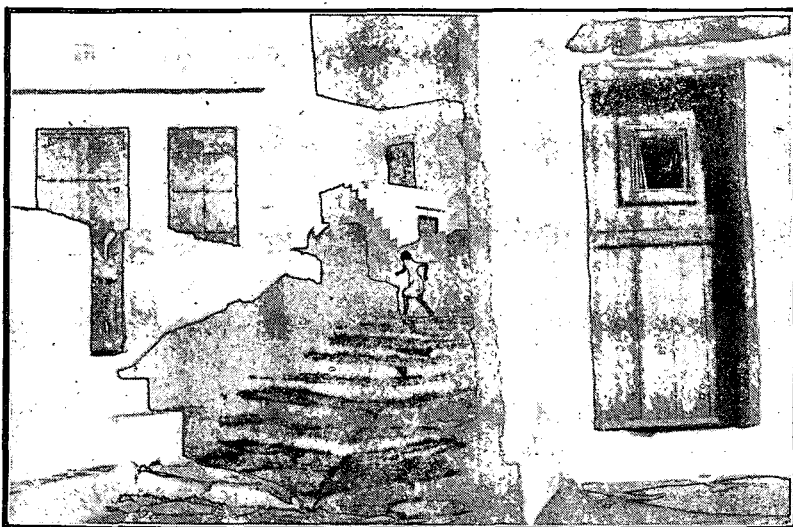
What of the reader of this article who is a collector rather than an institution? How do you protect your books? Place an ownership mark on every book, manuscript, map, or other literary property you value—in permanent ink and where it can be easily located without disfiguring the book. Do not go out and buy one of those awful embossers that are sometimes advertised as the reader's friend. They deface books, and the embossing sometimes can be ironed out. Make cards or lists of the

peculiarities of the copies you own: a coffee stain on page 33, a note, a small wormhole, for these may be the key to identifying them. If something is stolen, call the police (also the FBI if the value is over \$5,000), call BAM-BAM, notify your insurance agent, and prepare to testify if the thief is caught. Moving quickly to report and noisily to prosecute may not stop book theft entirely, but these actions certainly are making book thievery an unattractive profession.

SOLUTION TO SEPTEMBER "UNSOLVED"

O'Neil was the murderer.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

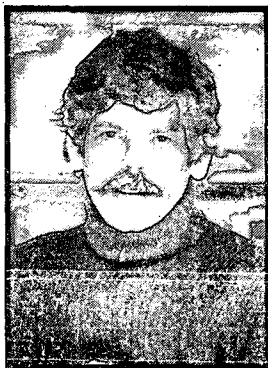


Cartier-Bresson/Magnum

Why is she running, through these silent places? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10017.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



VAN DE WETERING

A recent article in *Publishers Weekly* declared that sales of mysteries are on the rise. Our ranks are, apparently, swelling, good news for us old-timers because it means a revived effort on the part of publishers to supply us with books. Already, one happy consequence has been the trend to reissue classics. Another inevitable result of this revival will be a renewed discussion of the age-old question, "What do mystery readers want?"

The answer, you may be thinking, is patently obvious. We want fresh backgrounds, ingenious plots, suspenseful writing. I always feel a surge of pity for anyone who has to ask.

Another element we want I've left for last on the list because I think it is perhaps the most crucial: the presence of strong characters with whom we can empathize. That would surely explain why so many diehard fans are drawn to mystery series. And this month I have an author to recommend who, in my opinion, delivers the goods on all counts.

It was at the suggestion of a friend that I bought my first Janwillem Van de Wetering novel. That suggestion cemented our friendship, just as each subsequent novel in the series has reinforced my affection for these books. Their setting is modern-day Amsterdam,

on the surface a lovely old city of canals and Dutch masters. Beneath the facade, however, exists a disconcerting subculture of displaced hippies and international crime rings, of dark struggles for political power and the full range of human passions and mayhem. At the center of each book there is usually a puzzling murder—the mere entrance to a labyrinth—that calls for the talented teamwork of Adjutant Grijpstra and Sergeant de Gier under the watchful eye of their commissaris.

It is here that the author weaves his magic: the characters in these novels are truly the ties that bind. Grijpstra is the senior of the two men. He is hopelessly trapped in a gloomy marriage (which is also funny in a darkly comic way). Outwardly morose, overweight, and almost slovenly, Grijpstra is long free of any illusions about his fellow man. He is stolid and likes to be thought of as dowdy, dour, and dull. Many people—to their regret—do just that.

Not so de Gier, however, who knows better. Here is the perfect complement to the adjutant. De Gier is a young and handsome bachelor, careful of his appearance, carefree in his manner, devoted to both his unfriendly cat and the geraniums

he nurtures in small pots on his apartment balcony. An odd couple are Grijpstra and de Gier, yet they work together so smoothly that they rarely need to consult with their commissaris. He is the third major character, a courtly old gentleman whose crippling arthritis never dulls his gentle wit. He is a kindly philosopher-police-man, proud of his two men and amused by their friendship. So is this reader. All of the characters who populate these tales are drawn with humanity, irony, and great attention to detail. They make excellent company.

The author was once a member of the Amsterdam police force, as he wittily explains in a short preface to *Outsider in Amsterdam*. (He now lives in Maine, the setting—not surprisingly—for *The Maine Massacre*.) Van de Wetering is also a student of Zen, and has, in fact, written several nonfiction books on that subject. Perhaps that discipline has added the extra dimension to these novels that apparently endears them to even non-mystery readers. What I do know is that when I think of Van de Wetering, I think of details: the ancient turtle that inhabits the commissaris' garden, its mere presence as necessary and reassuring to the old man as the

fussing concern of his dear wife; or the grand, improvised music that Grijpstra and de Gier make in the office when they are stymied in their current case. Just as Sherlock fiddles, so do these two play—Grijpstra on drums abandoned there long ago, and de Gier on the flute he always carries tucked away in a pocket. Perfect! Then there was the time when the commissaris had to travel to wintry Maine on personal business; the stalwart Grijpstra somehow wangles a foreign exchange deal with the tiny local constabulary there so that de Gier can keep an eye on their ailing superior. (A good thing, too; the landscape provided murder along with snowdrifts.)

Don't let me mislead you. None of this fine etching is at the expense of the plots. There's serpentine mystery and suspense galore, whether it be a chase on a police launch through

the watery "streets" of Amsterdam or a dangerous battle of wits with the Japanese underworld climaxing in a bizarre banquet in Japan. And whether he's in Amsterdam, Maine, Japan, or the Dutch West Indies, Van de Wetering is surefooted, writing with intelligence, sophistication, a keen eye, and a sharp ear for drama.

There are eight titles in the series to date, and I recommend you do as I did and begin at the beginning, with *Outsider in Amsterdam*. Follow up (as I'm confident you will do) with *The Corpse on the Dike*, *Tumbleweed*, *Death of a Hawker*, *The Japanese Corpse*, *The Blond Baboon*, *The Maine Massacre*, and *The Mind Murders*. Most of the books are available in hardcover in Houghton Mifflin editions; Pocket Books does the paperbacks. And once you've read them all, do *your* friend a favor—pass the good word.

MYSTERY REVIEWS

Author Sue Grafton has her lead character in "A" *Is for Alibi* remark that "the basic characteristics of any good investigator are a plodding nature and infinite patience. Society," she continues, "has inadvertently been grooming women to this end for years." Thus we find Kinsey Malone, a thirty-two-year-old divorcee and California private eye, taking on a murder investigation. Her client: the victim's wife, who is also the convicted murderess. She hires Kinsey on the day she's paroled, having served eight years of her prison term. Kinsey's quirky—she jogs, then downs a Big Mac and large fries—plus she's tough, smart, and quick on the draw, considering that the trail is cold as well as littered with more

recent corpses. This is a very promising start in what is advertised as a new series starring Kinsey Malone. (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, \$12.95, 275 pp.)

Death's Clenched Fist is set in New York City in the 1890's, the age of nickel steins and free lunches at the end of the bar. The fun in this novel by James Sherburne is definitely in the backdrop, as breezy, horse racing reporter Paddy Moretti becomes embroiled in a May Day riot in Union Square, a brawl in McSorley's pub—and an assassination that leads to connections in Tammany Hall. (Houghton Mifflin, \$10.95, 190 pp.)

John R. Fegel has written an unusual thriller that opens when Atlanta M.E. Twig Stanton is called to a new downtown hotel to examine a body that has catapulted from an upper balcony smack into the middle of the tower's lobby. The story then flashes back to the Bay of Pigs, and an incident involving two men in a tense cat-and-mouse game that covers many years and many miles before it ends up in Stanton's lap—along with **The Dance Card** that is the source of all the trouble. It's also the title. (Avon, \$2.95, 312 pp.)

Dutton has just reissued Amanda Cross's **The James Joyce Murders** in hardcover (\$10.25, 174 pp.), first published in 1967. The six books in this series feature Dr. Kate Fansler, university professor of Victorian lit. As her fans know, Kate seems to attract trouble. This time she's summering in the Berkshires as guardian over a batch of James Joyce's publisher's papers, a delinquent nephew, and an assorted menage of colorful eccentrics. The eye of the storm, surely, but she's also at the center of a murder. The dialogue is unbelievably arch and the literary references fly faster than the bullets. It's a lot of fun for mystery fans who started life out as English majors.

There's also a woman protagonist at the heart of Peter Abrahams' **The Fury of Rachel Monette**, a fast-paced thriller that races from a quiet college town to political platforms in Israel and finally to a shocking climax in—well, I won't give you any clues here. Suffice it to say that Rachel is a believable, likable, and very strong character who, when her husband is inexplicably murdered and her small son kidnapped, fights like the proverbial tigress to save her sanity and her child. This is the usual gambit of a "civilian" whose world suddenly turns upside down, and who finds himself forced to call on resources and ingenuity and even violent emotions that have heretofore lain untapped. But Abrahams has devised a

suitably labyrinthine plot, and Rachel Monette makes a refreshing change from the female-as-victim to the woman protagonist determined to survive. (Pocket Books, \$3.50, 360 pp.)

In **Nevsky's Return**, Dimitri Gat introduces us to Yuri Nevsky, a loner and private eye of Russian descent. He returns to the old neighborhood in Pittsburgh when an aged Russian woman asks him to locate her grandson, a "good" boy who is wanted by the police for murder. With the assistance of his tenant and friend, an attractive WASP lawyer named Charity Day, Nevsky returns with a vengeance, uncovering a bizarre plot with roots in the old country, and discovering something about his own roots in the bargain. There's lots of Russian atmosphere, while Yuri and Charity make a good team. (Avon, \$2.50, 239 pp.)

Oxford philosophy don Ambrose Usher (*The Treasury Alarm*) returns, too, in **Murder in Paradise** (Walker and Company, \$11.95, 224 pp.). Here the very self-possessed Briton joins his old Scotland Yard friend Tom for a vacation visit on the Caribbean island of Santanna, and a chance meeting with an exotically lovely Chinese girl on the plane bodes well. But there's trouble in paradise when Tom is murdered—and the solution lies in a pattern that includes a fierce drug ring and a political coup. Author Jocelyn Davey is, in real life, Chaim Raphael, formerly an Oxford don and member of the British Foreign Service.

Two collections of short stories for those of you who like to retire with spooky "shorts," daring sleep to come. Editor Edward D. Hoch has compiled **The Year's Best Mystery & Suspense Stories, 1982** (Walker and Company, \$12.95, 228 pp.). In addition to the fifteen stories selected by an old pro, there is also a list of "The Best Novels of 1981" by Martin Harry Greenberg, and other interesting data on mystery short story events of 1981. Walker has also published **Tantalizing Locked Room Mysteries** (\$12.95, 287 pp.) edited by Isaac Asimov, Charles G. Waugh, and Martin Harry Greenberg. This is an irresistible collection of twelve stories whose solutions appear to be, as Asimov puts it, that "no one done it."

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FICTION

THE TELLER AND THE UNTOLD WEALTH

by John F. Suter

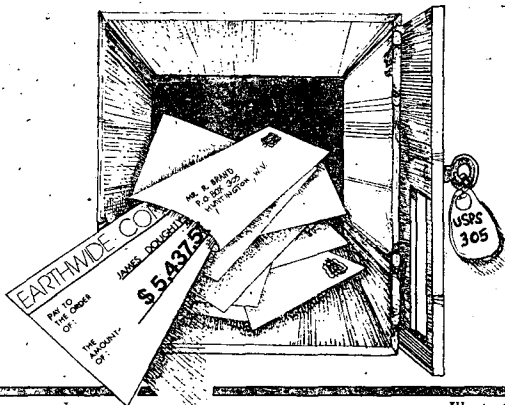


Illustration by Lisa Mansollillo

Jim Doughty's long fingers were drumming on the armrests of his wheelchair. He was scanning the street from the picture window in his living room. April rain flecked the glass.

"Mail's late today."

His housekeeper, Ruth Messner, paused in her search for the oregano in one of the kitchen cabinets.

"Maybe there wasn't anything."

Doughty turned his head. "Why? Did you see George go by?"

Mrs. Messner reached a muscular arm deeper into the shelf, groping for the can she wanted. "No, but you sometimes don't get a thing. Today might be one of those days."

Doughty gestured impatiently. Except for the weakness in his legs, he was a vigorous seventy.

"I have a dividend check due today."

Mrs. Messner retrieved the can. "Well, you know how the mail service is nowadays."

"Your pay comes out of that check."

"I trust you, Mr. Doughty," she answered. A smile pushed aside the wrinkles in her homely face.

He turned his massive grizzled head once more toward the window. His hazel eyes stared

out of a face permanently tanned by years of sun and wind. He was unaware that he should have been watching earlier. The mailman had already passed, and there was nothing for Doughty that day.

The particular envelope he wanted would never reach him.

"Do you want to be rich?"

It seemed uncharacteristic of her. Julian Shea stopped trying to find profundity in the bottom of the sherry glass.

"What?" he asked.

She repeated it. "Do you want to be rich?"

With his medium-length hair, sharp nose, and close-cut black beard, he resembled a Renaissance nobleman in gray polyester.

Even his responding look had a haughtiness in it.

He leaned back into the corner of the davenport. "You're not reaching me, Nan. I just want to drift and unwind, and you start with this Dare To Be Great pitch. Are you into some pyramid scheme?"

She shook her head. "Go home if you want to, Juley. But I do wish you'd stay long enough for me to run something past you."

Shea looked around the living room. A few notches up from orange crate end tables and brick-and-plank bookshelves, but not many. Still, on

a bank teller's salary, she had done well. The hanging plants helped. And the food and wine were always the best in the price class.

Nancy followed his glance. "Yes, I'd like something better. You're not rolling in it either, are you?"

Julian shrugged. "Whatever's on your mind, it's not legit, is it?"

"Of course not."

She looked like a chestnut-haired replica of John Tenniel's Alice, he thought. But surely she wasn't counting on an unlined brow to deflect suspicion if she was going to attempt a rip-off at the bank where she worked.

"So okay. Tell," he said.

"Have you any larceny in your heart, Juley? I do, but if you don't, maybe you'd better not hear this."

He smiled faintly. "I put in a little time learning locksmithing. It wasn't with the intention of helping people who'd left their keys in the wrong place. Nothing ever came of it, and I gave it up. But I could be interested. Come closer and spell it out."

"It would be better if I stayed at this end of the davenport. Now, listen," and her tone changed, "you'd drop your teeth if you knew how much some of the people in this area pull in

from stock dividends every three months of the year. Between a hundred thousand and two hundred thousand dollars, and that's just through our bank."

"Maybe you get the cream of the crop. I think of dividend checks as being around thirty-five or forty dollars."

Nancy leaned forward. The serenity of her expression had been temporarily replaced by a glint in her gray eyes and a tenseness at the mouth.

"What I suggest doing, Juley, is cutting into that pie. It can only be done once. Once, here, that is, and once at any corporation we hit."

Shea snapped his fingers. "The details, the details."

"The dividend checks come in quarterly, as I've said. Some come in during the month before the calendar quarter—in February, say—some during the calendar quarter month—say, March—and some during the following month. Almost all of them have one feature in common: a place on the check to enter a change of address."

Shea sat up. "I think I'm beginning to follow you."

"On some of the checks, there's a round spot to punch out, to get the computer's attention. Some don't have it. You write your address change on the face of some; on others you put it on the back. These details don't

Shea tapped his teeth with a fingernail, and the genesis of Doughty's troubles occurred. "I think some misdirection is needed."

"It wouldn't hurt."

"Profitable misdirection."

It was her turn to be interested. "What do you have in mind?"

"I don't know, Nancy Drewster—excuse me, Nancy Brewster. Maybe I can tell you tomorrow."

This was many days before Doughty's check failed to arrive.

him up and down the basement steps readily.

Because he was preoccupied, he failed to hear the mail fall through the slot in the front door. Mrs. Messner, watching him, missed it also.

Later, wheeling the chair through the hall, he saw the handful of envelopes on the floor. He rolled close, pushed them into a group, and scooped them up.

He flipped through them quickly, then at a slower rate, making sure that his first impression was correct.

She looked like a chestnut-haired "Alice"; he resembled a Renaissance nobleman in gray polyester. "Have you any larceny in your heart, Juley?" she said. "I do, but..."

Doughty was busy in the kitchen, replacing a washer in the hot water faucet for Mrs. Messner. She made no protest about this, realizing that his performance of maintenance tasks was good therapy. The house was a one-story ranch style, with a basement. Doughty could work anywhere in it. He had two wheelchairs, one for ground level, one for the basement. His strength in his upper torso and arms got

"Where is it, dammit, where is it?" he muttered.

Mrs. Messner came by carrying the dirty laundry for washing.

"Something wrong, Mr. Doughty?"

"This is the second day, and my dividend check's not here yet. Look out and see if George is still in the neighborhood."

She followed his request and went to the front stoop. After several seconds, she returned.

"No sign of him."

"I thought it might have been mixed with somebody else's mail. Maybe he'd remember seeing it earlier."

Her stolid expression was unchanged as she shook her head. "Your neighbors are pretty good to you, Mr. Doughty. If any of them got it, they'll bring it over."

Nobody did.

The evening after their first discussion, Nancy was in a computer programming course. On the following one, Julian came for dinner. They avoided reference to their talk while they ate, but it was clear that both were impatient. The atmosphere was sexual in its excitement.

Both of them were drinking scotch, Julian with plain water, Nancy with Seven-Up. Their shoes were kicked off for comfort.

"All right," Nancy said. "What about misdirection?"

"I think I have it. We use the post office."

"How?"

Julian took a short sip of his drink. "First, some background. You know that the complex where I live is tall on security? Doors locked, you don't get in without a key, visitors must clear with the manager. Mail is put into cubicles just in-

side the side hall, across from the manager's office.

"All this talk about dividend checks reminded me that every few months the guy who has the mail slot next to mine gets an envelope from Earthwide Communications—EarCom. It has to be a check. The envelope has stuff printed all over it in large rust-colored letters about *Deliver promptly on the first of the month*. Or something like that."

"I didn't know that. Of course, I only handle mail deposits once in a while, and they're in envelopes supplied by the bank."

He waved his glass. "Sure. But, you see, this gives you a fix on when EarCom's checks can be expected to be delivered. Not on the last day of the month, not on the second of the month—unless the first is a Sunday or holiday. The first is it."

Her unlined forehead wrinkled momentarily. "We hold-up a mailman on the first of that month?"

"No. Do your notes have any EarCom stockholders? And what months are dividends paid?"

"Hold on." She got up and went to a dresser in the bedroom, where she took a stenographer's notebook from a drawer.

She was flipping pages when she sat down. "They pay off on

the first, fourth, seventh, and tenth months. And," her eyes gleamed, "I have two big ones and a small one on the list."

"How big?"

"There's a James L. Doughty who drew down fifty-four hundred and some last quarter, and a Howard T. Smith who hit a little over twenty-eight hundred that time. Thomas E. Bronson collected between five hundred and five fifty."

Shea pulled a jotting pad from his pocket and retrieved a pencil from the end table beside him.

"Have you Doughty's address?"

"I have them all." She read the address to him.

"How about Smith?"

"Smith has a box in the main post office."

Shea motioned with the pencil. "Hold it. A box. That makes it one step harder, but not impossible. In fact, it gives us a stronger and fishier red her-ring."

"What about Bronson?"

"We forget him for now."

Nancy leaned back and took a deep swallow of her drink. "And what do we do about the two big ones?"

Shea grinned. "We have about three weeks until the first of April. For openers, each of us is going to rent a box in the main post office."

Several wet April days passed, and Doughty's check still had not been delivered. Suspense had driven him to station his chauffeur, a divorced man in his late forties, on the outside of the house each day near the time of mail delivery. The chauffeur, Jack Grady, lived in a three-room apartment behind the garage and was not unwilling to carry out the request. It gave him a chance to talk to George, the mailman, although he was supposed only to inquire about the missing check.

Grady's daily message, "George says he still hasn't seen it," finally became too much for Doughty. He called the post office and reported the incident to a Mrs. Collins, who sounded sympathetic.

When Doughty had given her all the pertinent information, there was a hesitation at the other end of the line. Then Mrs. Collins resumed, this time trading information.

"Mr. Doughty? I see here that yours is not the only complaint. Do you know a Mr. Howard T. Smith? No? Well, Mr. Smith also receives dividend checks from Earthwide Communications, and he hasn't received his for this quarter, either. He has a box here at the post office. This suggests some sort of delay at the other end. Why don't you

wait a day or two longer, then call the company and see what their advice is?"

The news of a possible wider disruption mollified Doughty. He expressed thanks and hung up.

This time, Shea did not wait until they had left the dinner table. He took out his key ring and laid it beside his plate.

"There's my post office box key. Did you get yours?"

She smiled and went quickly to the coat closet for her purse. When she had returned, Shea had detached a key from the ring. She took a key from the purse and placed it beside his.

Shea studied the two keys, pushing them around with sensitive fingers, turning them over, and placing one on top of the other. Nancy sat leaning on her left elbow, watching him.

"What are you up to?" she asked.

"I know something about locks and keys, remember? I'm going to get us a master key to let us into Mr. Smith's box."

He tore a piece of paper from his jotting pad and traced one of the keys twice. On one tracing, he indicated the grooves on the left side; on the other, he marked those on the right.

"Now I'll know what sort of blank to look for. Any of the busier shopping marts or mail

order department stores should have one."

"Get two, in case the first one bombs."

His reply was bantering, but he also meant it. "It won't bomb, but your wish is my command, lady."

At the end of ten days, Doughty was tired of waiting. He had a toll-free number for complaints by EarCom investors, and he made use of it.

He got a response on the first ring.

"Earthwide Communications, Thelma Rogers speaking. May I help you?"

"You may try, young lady," Doughty said. "I'm missing my quarterly dividend check, and I wonder if you have any information about it."

"One moment, sir, and I'll transfer you to the bank that handles the disbursement. What is your name, sir?"

"James L. Doughty."

Within seconds, Doughty was connected with an officer of the bank. On request, Doughty supplied his name and address and the nature of his problem.

The man from the bank, a Franklin Alexander, hesitated.

"Mr. Doughty, can you hold for just a minute?"

"I can hold as long as you like, so long as I get some pos-

itive results."

"Thank you. I'll be back to you as quickly as possible."

Alexander was back on the line in a little longer than a minute.

"Mr. Doughty? Thank you for waiting. Ordinarily, we might have begun by instituting a mail search from this end—"

"There might be one going from this end."

"Yes, sir, but it won't produce the result you want. You see, there was a similar request from a Mr. Howard Smith, of your city. One of our other officers decided to look at our cancelled checks before asking for the postal investigation, and he found that Mr. Smith's dividend check had cleared the bank and been returned. I was aware of this, and I asked our computer if the same thing was true of your check. It is.

"Your dividend check has also cleared through your bank and been returned to us."

Doughty felt the blood drain from his head. He felt as though a massive hammer blow had hit the back of his neck.

"Returned to you?" he said hoarsely. "I haven't even seen the damn check!"

"I see, sir. That seems to be what Mr. Smith claims, also."

"Claims? I'm not claiming! It's true. What do I have to do to get my money?"

There was a momentary pause. "Mr. Doughty," Alexander finally said in neutral tones, "it's clear that you have quite a few shares of stock, and we want you to have your dividend. This is what we propose: we will send you a photocopy of the check, back and front. Please study it and supply us with an affidavit concerning your signature. Over and above that, let us know if you recognize the handwriting of the endorsement and the name of the bank. Is it a bank where you do business? When you return us the information, we'll send your check. Registered mail."

Doughty considered this. It was pointless to be hardheaded. "Fair enough. I know I've been ripped off, and I suspect you want to nail the one who did it. By the way, do you have an address for this Howard Smith?"

"A post office box, I think. One moment."

Somebody in the postal system, thought Doughty. Maybe more than one somebody.

Shea's face was alive with excitement when Nancy let him into the apartment.

"Whatever you're fixing, put it on the back burner," he said.

He walked into the kitchen and sat down at the table, Nancy following. He pulled two keys from his pocket and slapped

them down on the table.

"There they are. Two master keys that'll let us into Howard T. Smith's post office box. Or any other box down there."

Nancy stared at them, almost expecting them to glow.

"Who made them?"

He drew up in mock indignation. "Who else? But I won't tell you which of my machinist friends let me use his equipment, or the story I fed him to get to do it."

She covered his hand with hers. "Lots of talents, Juley. Insurance man, would-be locksmith, future rip-off artist—"

He turned serious. "The first of April is next week. If you have time tomorrow, go to the post office and give up the key to your box. Tell them—well, don't tell them anything. They don't care. Just surrender the box. I'll give up mine sometime later."

Doughty was on the telephone to Howard Smith. He found Smith surprisingly calm and unflappable. From the sound of the man's voice, he pictured Smith as bald and fat. He was wrong on the bald. Smith had a thick head of gray hair.

"Did you get the copy of the damn check yet, Smith?" he asked.

"It came today."

"The endorsement, was it a good forgery?"

"Didn't look anything like my signature."

"My copy hasn't come yet," Doughty growled. "This sounds like just what I've been expecting."

"One thing they didn't do," said Smith, "was have the gall to run it through my bank. It went through Mason County National, in Point Pleasant."

"I figure this for an inside job at the post office," said Doughty. "How about you?"

"Has to be. I'm told they have postal inspectors working on it already."

"This ever happen to you before?"

Smith suppressed the urge to yawn. "Not like this. I've had checks go astray in the mail, and the firm at the other end's had to stop payment and send another. I do a little consulting in machinery for plastics processing. But, no, I've never had anything intercepted before."

Smith's patience was getting to Doughty. He felt that he had to explain himself, although he did not know why. "Well, this thing won't break me, Smith. I was a tool pusher for Cambrian Oil's drilling company until ten years ago. An accident on a rig chewed both of my legs, and I only have partial use of 'em. I draw a

pretty good disability pension. It's the idea of the thing. I don't like somebody messing with what's mine."

Smith had lost interest. "Look at it this way, Doughty: we'll both get our money. Whoever did it isn't hurting you or me, he's hurting EarCom."

Doughty rang off. He sat staring at the phone. "But he used *me* to get at EarCom," he snorted.

On March 31st, Julian Shea obtained a "Hold Mail" card at the post office. He filled it in as "James L. Doughty," giving complete details of Doughty's address and zip code. The card instructed that the hold on the mail should begin on April 1st. Shea did not fill in the box indicating a date for resumption of service. That was common practice when one's length of absence was uncertain.

He turned the completed card in at one of the busy parcel windows. It would be relayed from there to the sorting area farther back in the building.

On the morning of April 1st, Shea returned to the post office a few minutes after eight in the morning. He went straight to Smith's box, opened it, and flipped through the four envelopes inside. The EarCom envelope was the bottom one.

He quickly slipped the enve-

lope into his left breast pocket, pushed the rest of Smith's mail into the box, locked it, and walked away. The first half of the day's operation was complete.

Nancy Brewster had received permission to leave the bank at three in the afternoon for a fictitious dental appointment. When she went out, she crossed to a department store across the street and entered the women's room, already wearing a pair of lightly-tinted sunglasses. She rolled her hair into a bun, pinned it, and put on a large-brimmed hat she had been carrying in a department store shopping bag.

Her next destination was the post office, a block away. Here she went to the special window, out of the main stream of business, where parcels for box holders could be claimed and "hold mail" could be handed over.

A large, youngish man with red hair came to the window. "Yes, ma'am?"

"I'd like a 'Resume Delivery' slip."

He reached into a slot beside the window and laid a white slip of paper and a pencil on the window ledge.

She filled the blanks quickly, specifying resumption of service at Doughty's residence on April 2nd. She signed the slip "Mrs. James L. Doughty" and

handed it across.

The clerk barely looked at anything but the address. "I'll get your mail."

Two minutes later he was back. The day's mail was surprisingly bulky.

"Short hold," he said. "Just today's stuff."

"My husband's on a business trip," Nancy improvised. "I started with him, but I got a call that my father was ill, so I came back."

"Too bad," the clerk said sympathetically. "Hope it's not serious."

"We don't know yet."

She walked away, clutching Doughty's mail in a trembling hand. Her thoughts were moving randomly, but one kept coming to the surface: what if the EarCom check had missed its April 1st delivery?

When she reached a lobby desk out of sight of the pick-up window, she stopped and laid the stack of mail down. She could riffle through checks and deposit slips at the bank with the speed of a blackjack dealer, but this other person's magazines, catalogues, and letters refused to be sorted rapidly. Impatience tore at her nerves.

Finally, two-thirds of the way down the stack, she found the envelope with the delivery admonition on it in rust-colored letters. It was as Julian had

described it.

Nancy hurriedly thrust the dividend envelope into her purse. She hoped, illogically, that nobody had seen Doughty's name. She was not concerned about the rest of the stack in front of her, but she had no wish to arouse Doughty's suspicions too early. She scooped up the rest of his mail, walked down the lobby to the letter slots, and pushed it in. A misdelivery would be assumed.

The second half of Shea's "profitable misdirection" had been completed.

That evening, she made no attempt to prepare a meal. Instead, she bought a bottle of champagne and buried it in a deep bowl, packed in ice. She set in on the kitchen table.

She heard Julian's hurried steps coming down the hall at ten minutes before six. She had the door open before he knocked.

Each of them saw the question on the other's face without articulating it. They both nodded simultaneously.

Nancy closed and bolted the door, pulling Julian well into the living room. "Not so close to the door!" she half-whispered. "Someone might hear."

Shea pulled Smith's dividend check from his pocket and held it up. "Twenty-eight hundred — and twelve — and fifty cents!"

Nancy held up a finger, went

to the coat closet, and got her purse. She came back carrying Doughty's check. "Fifty-four hundred—and thirty-seven — and *fifty cents!*"

Each clutching a check, they threw their arms around each other. Suddenly, Shea pulled free and took the check from Nancy. He walked to an end table, got out his pen, and did a quick totaling up on the back of the envelope for Smith's check.

"It comes to—eight thousand—two hundred—and fifty—point zero zero!"

"It's just on paper," she laughed. "We don't have it yet."

"We will by this time tomorrow."

"I have champagne cooling."

"Later."

It was much later before they got to the champagne.

Doughty had received the photo copy of his falsely-endorsed check, processed by the Spring County Bank, in Gallipolis, Ohio. He had immediately prepared an affidavit that the signature was not his and had returned it. A new check was promptly forwarded by return mail, and he had deposited it right away.

The episode caused him to reexamine his ingrained habits. When he was in his teens, both of his parents had ground

two things into him: upon receiving any check, he should either deposit it or cash it immediately, preferably at the bank; and after receiving money at the bank or anywhere else, he must put it away at once, for fear that someone might snatch it from him. He still practiced both habits, although since his accident, his chauffeur, Jack Grady, had taken the deposit to the bank.

Doughty decided to instruct EarCom to deposit his dividend check to his bank account in the future. The volume of mail arriving at the bank each day would reduce the chance of his money's being intercepted at the post office. He was unaware that Nancy Brewster would not have known of his large quarterly dividend if he had initiated this system earlier.

He was still smarting from the theft of the check, and he visited the post office every few days to see if the postal inspector had made any progress. One of these calls finally gave him something to think about.

Close questioning of every possible person who could have handled the EarCom checks between the airport and the point of delivery had uncovered Julian Shea's use of the "hold mail" system, but no sense of the person or persons involved had developed. The forms filled

in by Julian and Nancy had been discarded immediately after mail delivery had been resumed, to prevent accidental reinstatement of the "hold." Because of the volume of postal business, nobody remembered either Julian or Nancy.

The pilfering of Smith's check was a complete mystery. Smith had rented his box for twelve years, and the prior renter was no longer listed in the local postal directory. The clerks who worked that section of boxes were kept under close surveillance, but none of them had a suspicious background or was doing any unusual spending. The thought of a master key never crossed the inspector's mind. Since the clerks filling the boxes from the rear did not need keys, a master key was unheard of.

He did tell Doughty about the interception of the mail and asked for the names of persons aware that Doughty expected the check.

"Hell, I don't know," said Doughty. "My wife might have told you, but she's been dead these eleven years. Maybe some of my neighbors got one by misdelivery, once, but I trust all of them—or I did. That leaves only Jack Grady and Mrs. Messner, and them I *do* trust."

He looked at the inspector, a neutral sort of man. "Anyway,

it doesn't explain what happened to this Smith fellow. It looks more like one of your own, wouldn't you say?"

The inspector had taken enough flak about postal rates, poor delivery, and nine-digit zip codes to be stung. But Doughty had been half-persuaded by the forgery that he had been victimized by someone who knew something about him. He was not certain of it.

On April 2nd, Julian Shea cashed both Smith's and Doughty's dividend checks. He did this by a refinement of the original plan intended for dealing with changed-address checks.

He had earlier set up small accounts in banks in Point Pleasant, West Virginia, and Gallipolis, Ohio, two communities only a few miles apart. In both cases, he had obtained printed checks bearing Smith's name and Doughty's name respectively and magnetically coded with the account number.

Arranging to make business calls in the general area, he presented himself before a teller in each bank with an account check made to cash, plus the particular dividend check, endorsed and inscribed with the account number below the endorsement. Neither of the banks questioned the transaction be-

cause the payee was clearly a customer and the EarCom check was obviously genuine.

The \$8250 obtained this way was later invested in money market funds with a bank in Huntington, West Virginia, in the joint name of "Mr. and Mrs. Rodney Brand." The post office box that was to receive some of the changed-address checks was given as the point for receiving notices from the bank. This box was also in Huntington.

For Doughty, a few weeks passed without incident.

He heard nothing from the postal inspector. There was nothing to hear. Doughty, as a victim who had lost nothing in the end, was of little interest. None of the apples in the postal barrel seemed blemished, let alone beginning to rot. The investigation was stalled. Nevertheless, a close watch was being kept on all persons who might have had the opportunity to appropriate Doughty's and Smith's checks.

The first of the checks Nancy intended to re-route to the new address appeared as a deposit just over a week after the successful pilfering of the two EarCom checks. It was part of a larger deposit by a Carl Brown and was from Infinitronics, Inc.

She had only time to note

that the check was large while she went through the ritual of processing the deposit, returning the deposit receipt to the pleasant, gray-haired woman who was probably Mrs. Carl Brown, and placing the bundle of checks in its sequence in the drawer.

No customer followed Mrs. Brown. That gave Nancy time to retrieve the check and quickly fill in the change of address to the post office box in Huntington. She noticed that the amount of the dividend was \$2244.38.

It would mean that, three months from now, when the next Infinitronics check would be intercepted, the take would be over ten thousand—if no other dividends at all were diverted.

A few small checks, under two hundred dollars, passed through Nancy's window, but she ignored them.

Finally, one for just over fourteen hundred dollars came in for deposit, drawn on Union Broadcasting Corporation. After it was marked with the address change, nothing appeared. The month was light for dividend distribution.

On an evening near the end of the month, Julian was subdued and meditative.

She studied him thoughtfully. "A new angle? What do we stand to gain?"

He shook his head. "It's time to give some thought to safety. Two months until the first checks begin to arrive. From then on, it will be touchy. I think—two things: one, I become the clean-cut American boy I used to be—" he made razoring movements around his beard—"and we stop seeing each other from now until it's over."

Nancy became subdued herself.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Have I raised some imp that's whispering in your ear?"

"No," she answered. "I want to see if I understand this. You want us to seem to split up. If anybody remembers us together, you are tagged with that beard. So it's got to go. The new you is never seen with me. He goes to the post office box, and he visits certain banks to open accounts, make deposits or withdrawals. So do I. But we never go as partners. We never meet until it's over and we've split for parts unknown. Is that it?"

"Yes. You buy?"

"We have to use the phone to say what we've done."

"Agreed."

She avoided his eyes. "Five more months until it's all wound up. All I can do is lose myself in this computer course. Cold turkey."

"We don't have to. It's only a

suggestion."

"But it's a good one." She laughed with savage humor. "Let's make our plans right now for what we do when this is over. Then, let's make last things—last."

In May, there was a large influx of dividend checks from several large chemical companies, electronics industries, tobacco conglomerates, and business machines. It promised to be a good harvest in August.

Early in the month, Nancy drove to Parkersburg on a Saturday morning. She went immediately to the central post office and rented another box in the Brand name. It would receive the August checks. If something went wrong, this would make possible the collection of the August checks. If the Parkersburg box were compromised, the July and September deliveries could be collected in Huntington.

Unless something compromised both of the boxes.

She did not want to think of that.

She called Julian several times after she returned from the errand, but there was no answer. There was still no answer at any time on Sunday.

It's nothing I shouldn't have expected, she thought. To make the herrings really red, I'd bet-

ter do the same, myself.

Early on Monday evening, she finally got an answer.

"Juley," she said, "this is Nan. I thought you ought to know what I did on Saturday."

She explained about the box. When she had finished, she said, "What shall I do with your key?"

"Mail it to me."

"Mail it?"

"Yeah, tape it to a card or a piece of cardboard and send it first class. If it gets lost, what the hell. We can have a duplicate made."

When she had hung up, she sat staring at the phone.

I was right, she thought. Like a fat cat after a big bowl of cream.

She was unaware of the background of Julian's red herring.

Nancy was unable to keep an accurate total of the dividend checks that she marked for deflection in May, but she estimated it at close to seventeen thousand dollars.

She wondered how careful Julian would be in spending his half of the money.

In June, when address changes were being made on dividend checks from some chemical corporations, large banks, and oil companies, Doughty had begun to worry. He had built up a modest hold-

ing in Cambrian Oil stock over the years when he had still worked, and this was the month his dividend was due. He had intended to have it deposited directly to his bank account, as he had his EarCom dividend, but he had delayed doing it.

He need not have worried. Nancy and Julian had no intention of repeating the raid on the mail. The check was delivered.

Not realizing that he might be a target at the bank, Doughty sent Grady to deposit the check for him. He was still spared: Grady went to a different teller; and even if he had gone to Nancy, the deposit was less than a thousand dollars. Such dividends were not on Nancy's list.

Nonetheless, Doughty decided to wait no longer to have his oil stock dividends paid to the bank. He had Grady obtain the necessary form. But then, simply because he wanted to talk to an old friend, he called Cambrian Oil's New York office and asked to speak to Peter Atwood in employee relations.

Atwood came on the line, bluff and hearty.

"Jim! Good to hear from you! How long's it been? You have a problem?"

"Not with Cambrian. Not with any company, really, Pete. The postal service."

Atwood laughed. "The postal

service? Haven't you called the wrong number? Or do you want some extra muscle?"

Doughty wondered himself why he had made this call. Atwood was right. "Pete, I don't really need you," he said, then explained about wanting direct deposit of his money.

"No problem," Atwood said. "You just—"

"I know," Doughty said. "I guess I just wanted to sound off to somebody about why I'm doing this."

Atwood's tone became sympathetic. "All right. Start sounding off."

Doughty gave him a detailed account, including Smith's victimization and the fruitless postal investigation. He concluded, "I was actually sweating waiting for my check from Cambrian."

"Aren't you drawing *enough* pension?" Atwood boomed in mock outrage.

"I'm not hurting," Doughty answered quickly, "but suppose I had been?"

"Yeah, well—"

"Listen, Pete," Doughty said on impulse, "has anybody ever hit Cambrian like this?"

"You make it sound like a big deal, Jim," Atwood replied. "Actually, I don't know. Our dividends are distributed by a bank, just like nearly everyone else's."

Doughty looked down at the phone. He was deflating gradually. "Yeah, well, I guess this would be just a flyspeck to a big outfit of any kind."

"Well, no, not if you ever talked to the accountants. Anyway, you get the information about paying your bank—well, hell, Jim, send it to me, and I'll see that it gets done."

"Okay, Pete. Thanks for listening."

It had been a boring day for Atwood before Doughty called. After he rang off, Atwood's curiosity began to itch, and he decided to scratch it.

Shortly after eleven the next morning, Mrs. Messner called Doughty to the telephone.

"A Mr. Atwood wants to talk to you."

Doughty wheeled to the telephone. "Yeah, Pete?"

"Jim, do you happen to know a Philip Hoke, on Arbor Lane?"

"Here in town?"

"You got it."

Doughty thought carefully. "I've never even heard the name. Why? Did somebody get his check?"

"No, no," Atwood said "But I got interested and checked to see if there's been any dividend hanky-panky for us in your area. Seems not, but there was one funny thing.

"And it has to do with this

Hoke. He sent us a card authorizing us to convert his dividends to the reinvestment plan. The card lists the address I read you—his address for what must have been most of his life. *But*—they have his cancelled check for this last dividend, and he lists a change of address to a post office box in Huntington, West Virginia.”

Doughty grinned. It amused him to find Atwood becoming even more suspicious than he was.

“It’s simple,” he said. “The guy sent the card, then realized he was moving and indicated it on the check.”

“He deposited the check first,” Atwood objected.

“Then he made a mistake on the card.”

“It could be, but it bugs me. You have a directory handy? Give me his number, and I’ll call and ask him. Not my place to do it, but I’ll do it anyway.”

Doughty got the directory and searched. When he found the number, he read it off to Atwood.

Ten minutes later, Atwood called again.

“Jim? Pete. You’ll love this. I talked to Hoke. He’s not changing his address. Expects to be where he is until they carry him out feet first. That means—”

“That somebody diddled the

check for some reason.”

Atwood sighed. “And it needs to be looked into.”

Doughty thought quickly. “Pete, listen. How about holding off for a while? And how about giving me that post office box number?”

Atwood hesitated. “You’re not planning something, are you, Jim? You don’t know what you’d be getting into. Besides, a guy in a wheelchair would stick out like nobody else.”

“Never mind,” Doughty growled. “I have about three months to think of something. They won’t be looking for that check before then. And that reminds me—if anybody can hope to catch this person or persons, you’d better send a genuine check, at the proper time. The evidence has to be strong.”

“I see what you mean,” Atwood said. “I think that can be done. Now you stay out of it.”

Doughty, noncommittal, hung up.

Neither of them had yet thought of the bank as the source of the trouble.

Julian wanted to be certain that the post office would think of the boxes in Huntington and Parkersburg as active, so he occasionally mailed envelopes of different sizes, containing blank paper, to them. When it was convenient, he collected

them and threw them away.

Monthly literature from the bank in Huntington was also coming to the Huntington box, giving substance to its shadow renter. That was not one of Julian's better ideas.

Doughty had no clear idea of what should be done about the post office box in Huntington. He felt that his unknown thief was involved with it, but he could not be sure that the man Hoke was not really in it in some way. Suppose he was concealing money from his wife? He would never admit it to Atwood.

He finally directed Grady to drive him to Huntington and wheel him into the post office.

"I don't know why I'm doing this," he remarked as they maneuvered through the Friday afternoon crowd in the lobby. "I doubt there'll be anything in this box until September."

Grady had not been informed about any of the background for the visit and Doughty's obsession.

"I imagine you're right," he said tactfully.

"Here we are, Doughty said. "Slow down." He began counting off and muttering to himself, moving along the proper row of boxes. "That's it!"

He stared. "I'll be damned. It's not empty. Grady, look

through the window. See if there's anything in it."

The window was nearly at Grady's eye level. "Yes, sir. There's two letters in there."

Doughty gripped the arm of the chair. "That means he'll probably collect them this weekend—maybe today. We have to get a look at him!"

He considered the situation. "I'd be conspicuous, in this chair, and I'd get roused by somebody before long. Jack, put me in the car and put it on a meter in this block if you can. The post office parking's not long enough.

"Then you come back here and hang around that convenience desk. Keep your eye on that box. Get a soft drink or snacks, if you want, but watch for anybody opening it."

"Then what?"

"Follow him out, see where his car is, then come for me as quick as you can. We'll tail him."

But nobody came near the box on Friday.

Doughty and Grady took a room in a Huntington motel, in order to take up the watch on Saturday. Before they retired for the night, Grady made a useful remark.

"Mr. Doughty, if it's any help, one of the envelopes in that box was from a Huntington bank. I couldn't read who it was addressed to, but the bank part

was no trouble."

Doughty considered this. It seemed to confirm his suspicion that Hoke really was setting up a separate account. Still, it ought to be checked.

"What bank?" he asked.

"Cabell Savings."

"Good. I'll remember it tomorrow."

After an early breakfast, the two returned to the post office. Grady resumed watch over the still-unopened box. Doughty sat

on your bank, and I want to know if he has sufficient funds."

"What is the account number?"

Doughty had wanted to avoid this, but he went ahead. "I can't give you that. He's been looking at some old furniture of my mother's that I want to sell. That was last night. He said he'd be back today, but he'd have to give me a check. I want to know if the check will be good."

Doughty wanted more than ever to see the face of the man who had rented that post office box. But the box went untouched through Saturday and Sunday...

impatiently by a pay telephone, waiting for nine o'clock. He still did not know if the bank would be open on Saturday or not.

At five minutes past nine he learned that the bank was open. He asked for the bookkeeping department.

"Bookkeeping Department. What initial?"

"H."

"One moment." Another clerk came on the line. "May I help you?" "Yes," Doughty said firmly. "A man named Philip Hoke wants to give me a check

"You say the name is Philip Hoke?"

"Yes."

"One moment." Nearly forty-five seconds passed, then the bookkeeper came back. "I'm sorry, sir, but we have no Philip Hoke on our books. In fact, we have no one named Hoke at all."

"I see. Thank you, miss."

Doughty was still uncertain that Hoke was not using an alias, but he felt that the man was more likely a victim. He wanted more than ever to see

the man who had rented that box.

But the box went untouched through Saturday and Sunday. On Sunday night, Doughty had Grady drive him home again. He was chagrined.

Julian had escaped detection by driving to Parkersburg on Saturday, instead of to Huntington, to clear the box there of dummy mail. He had no fixed routine for doing this to either box, since July was the earliest that anything of value could show up. It was still only early June.

Doughty was fuming on Monday. He wanted to return to Huntington and keep Grady on watch. At the same time, he admitted to himself that that was impractical. Sooner or later the post office workers would notice Grady, and he would be investigated. The result would be a frank discussion with a postal inspector. Doughty did not want that yet.

He began to run through a mental list of acquaintances in a search for someone who might be able to help. He wished he knew a locksmith who would not scruple to pick the lock on the Huntington box, but he realized that seeing the contents of the box would not let him see the face of the renter.

He was scratching names off the list rapidly when his mind reached back and restored one it had rejected. This was George Jones, a statistician with the Workmen's Compensation Commission. Jones's help, if he got it, might be offbeat, but it might also work.

Doughty called Jones at home, when he knew he would be relaxed and willing to listen.

When the amenities were out of the way, Doughty reached for Jones's attention. "Jonesy, the reason I called is to see if you can help me catch a fellow who stole a small bundle from me."

He could hear the interest come into Jones's flat tones. "Tough, Jim. How much did he take you for?"

"Several thousand. Oh, I didn't lose, in the end, but—" He launched into a digest of details. As he went, he could almost see Jones's glasses glinting. "So, what I want you to do," he said in conclusion, "is to tell me when we have the best chance of spotting him at that box."

"Ah," Jones said. His mathematician's delight was evident. "What you want is a random pattern. You have from now through September, seven days a week, two persons to coincide. Let me go into my den and have my computer generate the pattern. I'll call you."

In what seemed to Doughty like a surprisingly short time, Jones called back. "Jim? In answer to your query, I've produced a schedule for you. No sweat. Shall I mail it to you?"

"How complicated is it?"

"You just show up once a week. The day is at random."

"Nothing I can't handle. And if you'll leave it with your wife, I'll pick it up tomorrow sometime. Be sure to include the bill."

Jones chuckled. "It's on the house. An interesting problem."

Doughty was about to conclude the conversation when he had a thought: "Can you guarantee this, Jonesy?"

Jones laughed outright. "No. It has a high probability, but it's not perfect. Any more questions?"

At least it's better than no plan at all, Doughty thought. "No more questions," he said.

During July, both Nancy and Julian drew on the original money obtained from Doughty and Smith to set up several small bank accounts. They did this separately, exchanging signature cards by mail before concluding the transaction.

Then, later in the month, both the readdressed Infini-tronics and Union Broadcasting checks appeared in the

Huntington box. By chance, Nancy and Julian each picked up one of these and deposited the money in two different banks.

Doughty's random pattern of surveillance did not put him in a position to observe either of them retrieving the mail. Neither had any sense of being hunted.

The first brush with reality came early in August. It touched Nancy.

Late in the morning on the fifth, a busy day, Nancy made a mistake. A check for more than nineteen hundred dollars in dividends was deposited. The depositor had not gone to Nancy's window in May and was thus a new source of money. Nancy processed the deposit and returned the receipt. As the depositor turned away, Nancy quickly filled in the Parkersburg box number as a new address, without thinking of what she had done.

She had not yet realized that she had taken a needless chance. In the plan, both boxes would be given up at the end of September. The check she had just altered would cause a rerouted dividend to go to Parkersburg in November—a wasted effort.

Several routine operations were handled at Nancy's window—checks cashed, deposits

made—when another customer appeared before her. She looked up and recognized the depositor of the nineteen-hundred dollar check, a firm-jawed, blue-rinsed widow in her early sixties. Her name was Myrtle Wilson.

"Yes, may I help you?" Nancy asked.

The woman laid her deposit receipt on the marble counter. "I believe there's been a mistake. I'd like to have it corrected, please."

"Surely," Nancy said. "What is the error?"

The woman pointed to the total. "This shows \$1924.46 deposited. It was \$1942.46."

Nancy smiled. "Oh, you must be Mrs. Wilson. Are you certain? I recall the large amount, but not the exact numbers."

"Recall isn't necessary," the woman said firmly. "Just check the deposit."

Nancy's stomach contracted. The address correction was already on the check.

With the usual deliberation of the experienced teller, she drew out the stack of the morning's deposits, wishing they had been collected for proofing. This was done several times a day. Why hadn't it happened this morning?

She finally located the Wilson deposit. She put the stack to one side and separated the slip, which the Wilson woman

had made out herself.

"Your slip agrees with the receipt," she pointed out.

The customer's cheeks became slightly pink. "I see. I must admit that you didn't make a mistake. I must have changed the figures, myself. May I see the check, please?"

It was the moment Nancy had been dreading. She decided on a course of action, hoping it would succeed.

The address correction was in the lower left corner of the check. She lifted the paper with her right hand, covering the correction with her forefinger. The amount to be paid was in the upper right corner, and that should be the focus of Mrs. Wilson's attention.

Nancy lifted the check and held it directly facing the woman. "The check also agrees with the receipt, doesn't it, Mrs. Wilson?"

The woman looked at the amount, and her color deepened. "Yes. Yes, it does. I don't know why I made such a mistake. I'm sorry."

"It's perfectly all right," Nancy said. Relief began to come over her.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to look at it a little closer," Mrs. Wilson said suddenly. "I still can't imagine why I'd do a thing like that."

Nancy's stomach knotted, but

she maintained a calm presence. "I'm afraid I can't let you do that, Mrs. Wilson."

The woman was surprised. "Can't handle my own check? Why not?"

"Regulations," Nancy said, hoping that her bluff would not be called. She pointed to the machine at her window. "Your deposit has been entered, and until all of the crediting to your account is completed upstairs, we can't return anything. In fact, you'd have to see Book-keeping later. It's cumbersome, I know. And I know that you're trustworthy, but some people aren't. That's the way it is."

She could see that Mrs. Wilson was considering an appeal to higher authority, although nothing was being said. Finally, however, realizing her own lack of justification, the older woman nodded.

"You're right. You're only doing your job, and I've been wrong. I'm sorry."

She left.

As she walked away, Nancy looked down at the check. She noticed that she had failed to punch out a little circle which would alert the payor's computer to the change of address. She quickly rectified that error and thrust the deposit back into the stack, just as the messenger arrived to take the deposits for proofing.

Weeks had been passing, and Doughty was following the pattern of visits to Huntington. So far, he had not hit a positive result.

He was late in getting there one day. A flat forced a half hour's delay in arriving, and parking difficulties lost another fifteen minutes. He wondered if that had cost him a look at the renter of the box.

It had—by five minutes.

Julian was happy these days. His spare time was pleasantly filled, and there were a comfortable number of thousands of dollars in several bank accounts.

Not all of these bank accounts had Nancy's name on the signature card.

She was totally unaware of this.

In the final week of August, Doughty and Grady went to Huntington on Thursday. Doughty settled down in the car to read a business magazine while Grady watched the box.

At twelve past ten, Grady came running from the post office.

"We've connected, Mr. Doughty!" he panted. "There he goes, just down the block."

Doughty looked, but he saw nothing familiar in the man in the neat summer suit.

"Going in the right direction, too," he said. "All right, Grady, let's not lose him."

Grady started the car but made no effort to pull out until there was no danger of overtaking Julian. Finally, when he judged that enough space existed between them, he eased the car from the parking space.

Doughty fretted. He still had not seen Julian's face. "What does he look like?" he demanded.

Grady shrugged. "You've seen his height and build. He's dark, no mustache or beard, sharp-nosed. He looks kind of scheming."

"It fits," Doughty growled. "Look, he's unlocking a car up there. Hang back and tail him."

They saw Julian get into a tan Honda Civic. Grady pretended to be waiting for the curb space when Julian pulled out. He let the Honda slip into traffic bound eastward. After two cars intervened, he followed.

"Going for I-64, I'll bet," he remarked.

Julian continued east until he could intersect Hal Greer Boulevard, then turned south on it. Finally he reached the I-64 interchange.

Grady paid close attention until he saw the Honda head for the eastbound ramp. The small car was nimble, but so far no

attempt at evasion was evident. Grady fed into the interstate three cars behind Julian.

They settled down to ordinary interstate driving. After about fifteen miles, the Honda angled to the right.

"Getting off at Lacey," Grady remarked. "What do you figure?"

"I don't know. Let's find out."

The Honda pulled up near one of the three banks in the small community of Lacey. Julian got out and went into the bank.

"Well, well," said Doughty. "Cashing a check or making a deposit? I'll bet on a deposit. It'd be nice to know what name it's in."

"I could take a look at his registration card and get his name," Grady said. "I got a coat hanger in the trunk."

"Not now," Doughty said. "There might not be time. Later, when he's at lunch."

Doughty was correct. In a very short time, Julian returned, and Doughty saw his face for the first time. Grady's description was accurate.

The Honda went to the next corner, made a U-turn, and headed east again. However, instead of returning to the interstate, it continued on U.S. 60, which still ran parallel to I-64.

Doughty, puzzled, had Grady

continue following, still keeping at least one car between them. He was even more puzzled when Julian diverted to a new subdivision in the next community.

When Julian parked in front of a modest, but new, brick ranch style, got out of the car, and rang the bell, Grady expressed wonder. "This isn't his house, or why would he ring?"

Doughty had observed a briefcase in Julian's hand and guessed that it was a business call. He ignored Grady and directed him to park near the intersection of a side road, where they could observe the house.

Julian eventually came out from a discussion about an insurance policy. He drove off, leading his pursuers on a long day of starts and stops.

Eventually, during a lunch stop in St. Albans, Grady had a chance to use his skill. He broke into the Honda and returned to Doughty with the car's registration card and a business card from the glove compartment.

Doughty scanned the finds. "Julian Shea. Let me write down his address. Charleston. Just as I thought. And his business card. Insurance. That explains his mobility, but not his information." He had Grady put the cards back, losing himself in thought.

When Grady returned, Doughty said, "Let's go eat and ignore Mr. Shea until tonight. We know where he lives. Now we must find out who else is involved with him."

Later, they waited so long near Julian's apartment that they were convinced that he would not go out that evening. However, he had dined before returning home. After a leisurely freshening up and a complete change of clothing, he was in his car again and on the move.

Julian led them to a four-family apartment building in the Kanawha City section of Charleston.

"Is this it?" Grady asked, watching the door of the ground floor apartment on the right.

Doughty grunted. He took nothing for granted.

After fifteen minutes, Julian and a slender girl with a mane of deep auburn hair emerged and got into the Honda.

Grady got ready to start his engine when Doughty stopped him.

"No need," he said. "Just go get the name off the mailbox, the door, or whatever."

He watched with approval as Grady followed his instructions. Then he was surprised to see Grady go to the door of the other ground floor apartment and engage in conversation the

man who answered his ring.

"What was that about?" he asked when Grady returned.

His driver grunted. "An idea. Her name is Kathy Miller. So I went next door and said I was looking for the Kathy Miller who is a legal secretary. The guy said no, she's not the one."

He grinned wider. "She works in a bank."

Nancy was happy to see September begin. In less than a month, she and Julian might be together again.

In the meantime, she was delighted to find what an aptitude she had developed for programming computers.

On the fifth of September, Doughty had a call from his friend Atwood, at Cambrian Oil.

"Bet you'd forgotten me," Atwood said. "Remember our talk about the dividend check for that Hoke fellow?"

Doughty's eyes lit. "Yes. I do indeed. And I've seen the fellow who expects to get it, and I know who he is."

Atwood was startled. "You do? You're not planning anything rash?"

"Not me," Doughty chuckled. "I've already laid it all out."

"Well, then," Atwood said, relieved, "the bank's mailing the check today."

Doughty made a quick calculation. "I'd guess two days to delivery at Huntington. Things should get interesting from then on."

Julian had no means of gauging when the Cambrian check should arrive in Huntington, and he did not inspect the box until the eighth. The check was there, as well as one from a food conglomerate.

When he left Huntington, he was followed, but he didn't notice it. He was thinking only of the money in his pocket and that this was the final month of the operation.

He drove west to Ashland, Kentucky, to the River City National Bank, parked, and went into the lobby. He leafed through his packet of varied deposit slips until he found the one for this bank, printed with "Mr. and Mrs. Philip Hoke." He filled in the amount of deposit, looked around for the least-busy teller, and started away from the desk.

A stocky man with stubborn gray hair and sagging jowls was also at the writing desk. When Julian started toward the window, the man ambled behind him. A second man joined him halfway across the floor.

Julian laid down the slip and the check. "I have a deposit."

"Just a minute," a flat, un-

emotional voice said at his left shoulder.

Julian looked up. A man of average height, so neutral as to be almost invisible, was staring at him. "Yes?"

"Mr. Philip Hoke?" the man asked.

"Yes."

The man drew out a wallet. "Green, U.S. Postal Service. Show me some identification, please."

Julian picked up the deposit slip. "Here."

"No good. Driver's license, please."

Julian's agile brain sought for a way out. There was none. Reluctantly, he pulled out his own wallet.

"You'll look foolish when I show you that I really am—"

"I'll take that chance. In the meantime, Mr. Hoke, meet Mr. Philip Hoke."

Julian looked to his right. The stocky man stared at him, nodding. Showing the driver's license was now only a formality.

Early that evening, Doughty received a phone call.

"Mr. Doughty? Phil Hoke. I want to thank you for tipping me off about this Shea character. He's being sweated right now. Oh, and they got his girl friend, Kathy Miller, too. But

there's one thing I don't understand."

"What's that?"

"You had it figured that the Miller girl got all the information at the bank and changed the check there. But she works at Fort Lee National."

The short hairs on Doughty's neck stirred. "Yes?"

"I don't see how she—I bank at Capital City National."

On the following morning, the ninth of September, Nancy called in sick at Capital City National. She had read the morning paper.

The story of the arrest of Julian Shea and Kathy Miller was a shock, but it was one she had always prepared to encounter. There was less shock in the news that someone had caught up with them than there was in the revelation that Kathy was a partner. The significance of this was not lost on her.

So Julian had not only been using their separation to make out with someone else, he had borrowed her own plan to line his pockets still more!

She hurriedly gathered as many of her portable possessions together as possible, filling two suitcases and several large cardboard boxes. She began to pack her VW hatchback. It was time to clean out the bank accounts and leave.

She was putting the next-to-last box into the back seat of the VW when a deep blue Buick Riviera doubleparked beside her. She looked up, into a pair of shrewd, hazel eyes set in a deep-tanned face.

"Miss Nancy Brewster?" a pleasant baritone voice asked.

"Yes?"

"Jim Doughty. Like to talk to you."

The name was familiar, but she had forgotten the context. "I'm afraid I can't," she answered, drawing it out in a helpless manner.

"I'm starting on a trip."

Doughty smiled. "I dare say. I suggest that you'd better find the time. Shall we go into your apartment?"

Nancy considered running, but she thought she had a better chance in facing them down—Doughty and his capable-looking friend. "All right, come on in. Try to make it short."

She was surprised when Grady came in, pushing Doughty in his wheelchair. She had supposed that they might not represent any kind of law, but this was a factor she could not sort out. She decided to remain wary.

Doughty looked around, observing the evidence of her imminent departure.

"You've read the paper, I

see," he commented dryly.

"Most people do, don't they?" She was still not giving him anything.

Doughty smiled in admiration. "Hoke was right when he told me that he always took his deposits to 'that sweet, innocent teller.' Jack, here, says he's done the same with mine. Although," he said, speculating, "I still don't know how you got my big check from the mail."

"You're talking in riddles," Nancy snapped. "I wish you'd go."

"Yes, you'll have a busy day closing out bank accounts, won't you?" Doughty's eyes gleamed. "Then what? On to Ohio? Kentucky? Pennsylvania? No matter. I imagine you already have a new driver's license and a phony Social Security card. Not too hard, nowadays."

"You make me sound like somebody whose picture's in the post office! I want you to leave."

"I don't hear you calling the police," Doughty observed. "Well. Let me set your mind at rest, young lady. I didn't come here to help rush you to the slammer. I don't want any cut of your take."

Nancy's eyes widened. "What do you want?"

"Starting to give in, eh? First, I want to tell you that the bank doesn't know about this yet, at

least not from us or Hoke. They will, as I'm sure you know."

She nodded in spite of herself.

"Second—from here on I'm going to have to convince you of something. Believe it or not, I'm not going to be the one to tell the bank about you."

Nancy's reaction of surprise turned to one of suspicion immediately.

"You want something. What is it?"

Doughty smiled, but the air of triumph Nancy looked for was missing. All she could see was geniality.

"I just want you to listen. Somehow, just after we bagged your boyfriend, I began to quit being mad. I began to stand back and really look at what you two had brought off. It's smart. It's clever. I admire a clever piece of work, even if I am one of the victims."

His smile narrowed slightly. "Not that I'm going to let your Julian off the hook. And, right now, I suspect you won't care. No—don't comment."

He looked at his driver and grinned broadly.

"Life's been a lot more interesting since these two started meddling with us, hasn't it, Jack?"

"You might say that."

"I do say it." He turned his attention to Nancy again. "All of a sudden, I see a new direc-

tion for me, a new facet of life. Now, tell me, young lady, there must be even bigger fruit to be picked than dividend checks—don't you imagine?"

Nancy, still waiting, nodded.

"Well, then, you've lost a partner. How about two new ones—Jack and me?"

She hesitated.

"I can put some capital in it—after I recover my temporary loss from you and Julian."

She still held back.

"We wouldn't expect to be the complete partner Julian was," Doughty said. "Neither of us is young."

Nancy looked into Doughty's hazel eyes and saw more than a hint of piracy in them. This man might have a depth and breadth that Julian had yet to acquire. She found that she liked him.

"If I refuse, I take my lumps, is that it?" she asked, testing.

"I'd give you a head start."

She yielded. "Very well. Have you any new ideas for starters?"

"Not yet. I'm new at this. Have you?"

"Yes. I'll move to another bank . . . somewhere else."

"Taking up where you left off here?"

"Perhaps. For now, you could help me collect the nest egg as fast as possible from the accounts we have spread around. But there's something else I've

just set up here in my bank, and you can play it out after I've gone."

Doughty's eyes gleamed with interest. "Tell me."

"I've been taking courses in computer programs," she said. "Now listen: do you realize that interest is calculated to four or more places past the decimal point, not only on ordinary savings accounts, but on many transactions? The two places credited to you, in cents, is what it's been rounded off to."

Doughty began to see the implication.

"I'll expand on it," said Nancy. "It would not seem to mean much money, if we were to think in terms of ordinary savings, but suppose we include interest on Certificates of Deposit and NOW accounts, where interest is paid to checking accounts."

"There's even more—and this might have gone past you. State law now permits banks to become holding companies. The stockholders of my bank have approved a proposal for us to become the central unit of such an organization, and five other banks in a radius of 150 miles have become part of it. Their computers are now in line with ours, so that our machines are now doing their interest calculations, as well."

"What I have done," said

Nancy, "is to set up a separate savings account in our bank. The computer has been instructed to feed into this all of the interest money *past* the second figure to the right of the decimal—for all possible calculations of interest. This new account will accumulate interest of its own, of course." Her lips quirked. "I couldn't resist."

Doughty nodded with enthusiasm. "I'd have done the same."

Nancy took a card from her purse. "This is the signature card for that account. The name is Willard Green. It was intended for Julian, but you can sign it and use any address you like. Of course, I'd expect fifty percent of the take."

"Understood. How long should I wait before I start to siphon from it?"

Nancy's smile had the same degree of piracy she had seen in Doughty's eyes. "Since it's a savings account, withdrawal isn't easy until the first ten days of each quarter. Then, too, we don't know yet how much money this is going to generate."

"Most of all, we don't know whether or not someone will discover what's going on. If they do, they might set some little traps."

She laid her hand on his arm lightly. "You're going to have to begin learning to calculate risks—partner."



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Batty and Pris (Rutger Hauer and Daryl Hannah), two of the replicants pursued by blade runner Deckard (Harrison Ford).

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



If the screenwriters of **Blade Runner** are right, police work won't be much different in 2019 from what it is now. The cops will still be tough, but no matter how great their contempt for criminals they will always find themselves having to call on a resourceful detective like Harrison Ford to come out of retirement and solve their problems.

Ford plays a former "blade runner," an agent whose job it is to track down and kill enemies of society. These enemies are runaway "replicants": android robots so perfectly made that only the subtlest tests can distinguish them from human beings. Ford has had enough of his dirty business, but the po-

lice force him to pursue two male and two female replicants. These fugitives have committed murder and recently slipped into the forbidden precincts of earth—in Los Angeles.

Futuristic cities done with special effects are ordinarily either slick technological marvels or decimated wastelands. But here the city is the product of what might be termed a combination of vertical progress and horizontal decay. High above the streets, offices and apartments light up the night sky, while below them the city is a much worn, teeming metropolis covered over with advertising signs bearing oriental characters. The denizens of the city's lower depths speak an ar-

got of combined Spanish, German, Chinese, and American slang.

The social polarization of the future Los Angeles, presented visually and without tendentious explanation, is science fiction novelist Philip K. Dick's compelling prediction of the future forty years hence (he worked on this production of his 1968 novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* but died before its completion). On the other hand the parallel between the twenty-first century police's inhumane treatment of replicants and twentieth century racism, something that *is* spelled out, comes off as being philosophically muddy, to say the least.

It isn't hard to work up sympathy for replicants, thanks to Harrison Ford's love affair with one who is even closer to being human than the rest. And for old timers at least, it helps that Sean Young, who plays her, wears nineteen forties' padded shoulders and an upswept hair style meant to recall the mysterious ladies of the old whodunits.

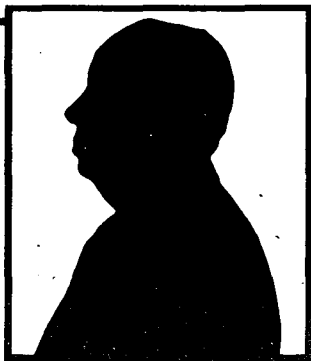
If anything, the plot hews too closely to detective movie for-

mulas. The cynical, disillusioned blade runner picks up a small clue. He follows it through the crowded dives of Little Tokyo or Chinatown. (It is usually raining, so that for once a trench coat would have come in handy.) The blade runner is repeatedly beaten up, but eventually he gets his man—or rather his replicants. At the beginning and end of the movie there are a few moments of Bogart-like voice over narration.

This kind of plot and style would once have earned the designation of a second feature "B" movie, which was not such a bad thing, of course. These days, though, the same plot is produced on a gigantic scale at a cost of millions of dollars. The result, furthermore, is what the French would call a cinematic *hommage* to the past. With the full page ads and the television spots, the producers are billing this as a very significant film, and that's more critical weight than the product can bear. Taken as no more than a resourceful mixture of the detective and science fiction genres, though, the gigantic spectacle that is *Blade Runner* comes off as a nice little movie.

FRAMES OF REFERENCE

by Peter Christian



Even though Raymond Chandler wanted to bring the murder mystery out of the drawing room and into the streets and alleys where it usually occurred, I rather think most of us have fond feelings for the **witty and urbane murderer** when he makes his appearance in mystery fiction and on the screen. Sardonic, elegant, sporting an old-school tie, this Establishment figure who dares break the rules makes a formidable opponent for the poor hero, who often himself is on the run, accused of the very crime the witty murderer has committed.

This is very much the situation in Hitchcock films, quite a few of which feature the urbane murderer at his superb best. In *The 39 Steps*, the fugitive Richard Hannay finds himself hopelessly outclassed by the leader of the spy ring, the man-with one finger missing, who is a respected landowner interrupting a house party to send bogus policemen to eliminate Hannay. (It is a tribute to our hero's pluck that he manages to turn the tables on both the counterfeit cops and the spy chief.) In *Saboteur*, Hitch's American variant of *The 39 Steps*, Robert Cummings must make his way crosscountry with the police at his heels—they think he has sabotaged a war plant. Because of an address on a letter he comes upon the large spread of gentleman rancher Otto Kruger, and is stunned to discover he too is a Fifth Columnist, an American playing above the rules. Cummings barely escapes with his life.

Betrayal among the ruling class has appeal for Hitchcock. Aboard the train in *The Lady Vanishes*, famed surgeon Paul Lukas shares a civilized but drugged drink with Margaret Lockwood. As her head drops, he informs her coolly that she will be removed to a local hospital at the next stop for brain surgery from which, regrettably, she will not recover. In *Foreign Correspondent*, Hitch's glorious epic of the days just before World War II, we know—but his daughter does not—that the distinguished Herbert Marshall, spokesman for the European Peace Movement, is actually in the employ of the enemy, not above kidnapping diplomats, organizing assassinations, and ordering the death of hero Joel McCrea. At the finale, he confesses to daughter Laraine Day that he is half German (after carefully explaining that she was adopted, a nicety of that troubled time), fighting for his country with the only weapons he knows. Proving that even urbane murderers can have changes of heart, moments later he dies a heroic death.

Curiously, the Second World War—the last war fought in the gentlemanly tradition—provided us with a large lineup of urbane murderers. The most prominent might well be Nazi George Sanders in Fritz Lang's *Man Hunt*, sneering to sportsman Walter Pidgeon that the difference between British and German playing-field attitudes is that his side plays to *win*—and not just for the sport.

The cinema game of espionage continued to enlist dapper murderers even after the war was over. Cary Grant is trapped in a spy scam in *North by Northwest*, and though he is a very well-turned-out hero by any standards, villain James Mason reacts to him with elegant disdain. Clifton Webb brought this aristocratic pose to several classic murder films. A memorable scene in *The Dark Corner* has him lure blackmailer William Bendix to a corridor in a high New York office building. Without ruffling his well-tailored white suit, he uses his antique cane to push Bendix out of a window.

Urbane murderers can be of either sex, as Gale Sondergaard has proved in several films, especially in *Sherlock Holmes and the Spider Woman*. They also fence well, thrusting and parrying in razor-sharp dialogue. A wonderful example of this is the Spider Woman's line casting doubt on rumors of Holmes's demise, while she plots to make the rumors true: "I think not. But if you were to ask me *tomorrow* if Sherlock Holmes is dead . . ."

So many elegant and superior murderers have strutted through our favorite mystery films there is not space even to mention them—Sydney Greenstreet and Orson Welles, Lionel Atwill and Peter Lorre, dozens of others. Next issue we will visit with more.

UNSOLVED

by George J. Summers

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?
The answer will appear in the October issue.

The sisters of Aaron Green were Betty and Clara; the brothers of his girlfriend, Flora Brown, were Duane and Edwin. Their occupations were as follows:

THE GREENS

THE BROWNS

Aaron: doctor

Betty: doctor

Clara: lawyer

Duane: doctor

Edwin: lawyer

Flora: lawyer

One of the six killed one of the other five.

1. If the killer and the victim were related, the killer was a man.
2. If the killer and the victim were not related, the killer was a doctor.
3. If the killer and the victim had the same occupation, the victim was a man.
4. If the killer and the victim had different occupations, the victim was a woman.
5. If the killer and the victim were the same sex, the killer was a lawyer.
6. If the killer and the victim were different sexes, the victim was a doctor.

Who was the killer?

HINT: From the premises and conclusions of the statements, determine which sets of three statements can be applicable.

See page 58 for the solution to the September puzzle.

"The Killer," taken from Test Your Logic by George J. Summers, © 1972 by George J. Summers, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, N.Y.

FICTION

STRANDS OF by Janet O'Daniel MURDER

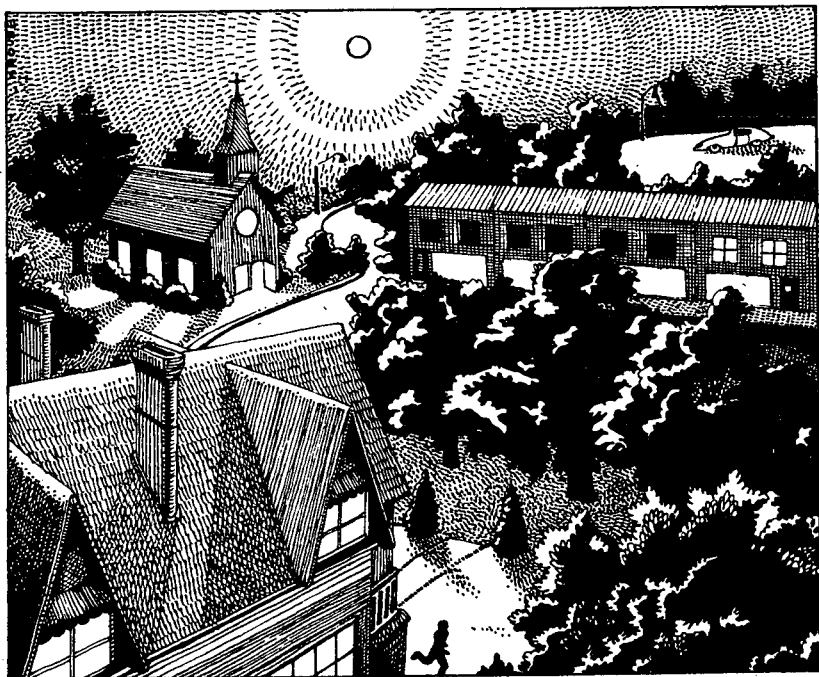


Illustration by Lisa Knouse

104
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
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On the last day of her life Mrs. Isabel Hatcher had her hair done. She walked the four blocks from her house to the center of town where her niece Edna Barnes had her beauty shop. She limped only slightly from the broken ankle that was now six months in the past.

Patrolman Bob Fesco greeted her at the corner and escorted her across the street. "Getting ready for the show tonight, Mrs. Hatcher?"

"What show is that, Robert?" Mrs. Hatcher spoke in her lofty, elegant way, which Bob rather liked. You seldom saw ladies of her type any more. He was quite sure she knew what show he meant.

"At the church hall. *Pinafore*. I hear it's going to be a good one."

"The church hall." Mrs. Hatcher held the homely phrase at arm's length like a soiled boot. "No, I think not, Robert."

Isabel's niece Edna also asked about it as she shampooed, rinsed and set her aunt's hair on pink rollers. Isabel would have none of the newer blow-dry techniques. "I do not care to look like a Hollywood starlet," she would say crisply.

"Have you decided to go to the show, Aunt Isabel?"

"Indeed not," Isabel replied.

"I do think it's going to be good. I'm doing hair for them and helping with costumes."

Good-natured Edna managed to look like a poor advertisement for her own establishment, The Beauty Barne. She had a slightly spreading, frowsy look.

"I plan to be at home this evening," Isabel said. "I do not care for amateur theatricals. No doubt Mrs. Glass will give me a report."

As it turned out, Mrs. Glass, who did housework for Isabel and who arrived early the next morning full of news and humming "Never Mind the Why and Wherefore," had no chance to deliver her review. She found Isabel's kitchen door ajar, its lock forced, and Isabel upstairs lying dead in her antique walnut tester bed.

It was Bob Fesco who broke the news to Edna, catching her just as she was opening her shop. "Can we sit down someplace?" he said. Edna gave him a puzzled look and they went back to the two shampoo sinks and sat in the tilt-back chairs. Quietly Bob told her what had happened, watched the color leave her face, and then said, "Just sit still for a minute, Edna. You want me to get you something?"

She shook her head. "I'm all right, honest. Just give me a chance to—"

"I know how close you were to her. She depended on you a lot," Bob said. Edna's plain face, swept of everything but shock, seemed to be trying to gather itself together. She held her hands tightly clasped in her lap and said, "Has somebody called Frederick?"

"He's been notified. He and his wife are on their way. Edna—we've got the man who did it."

Edna's eyes grew wide. "Who?"

"Rodney Pike."

"Rodney! But he's worked for Aunt Isabel for years, doing her yard. He'd never—"

"He drinks, Edna, you know that. They picked him up in Casey's bar around midnight with a pocketful of money. We had him in the drunk tank sleeping it off when we got the call about Mrs. Hatcher this morning."

"How did he—how was it done?" Edna whispered.

"Suffocation, with a pillow. Around ten o'clock, Doc Talbot says. And there was money missing. From the kitchen where she kept it for the household. Mrs. Glass said there was sixty dollars in the drawer when she left yesterday. Rodney had almost that much on him when we picked him up."

"But he must have gone upstairs."

"Probably looking for more. And I suppose she woke up and raised a racket."

"I'd rather think it was a stranger," Edna said softly, and looked down at her hands in her lap. Tears spilled out and ran down her cheeks. "You know what makes me feel worst?" she said thickly. "It's because we were all having fun last night—having such a good time at the show, talking about how beautifully it went off—everybody laughing and clapping, and that must have been right when—" Bob nodded, and Edna said, "Do you know she never learned to drive a car? Imagine. She didn't need to, she said. She had everything she needed right here. But of course she didn't. Always calling me to drive her to the podiatrist or the dentist or somewhere. And when they built the shopping mall over on Route 31 she loved going there—pretended she didn't but she loved it." She reached up and brushed at the tears.

"Are you going over there now?" she asked. Bob nodded. "I'll come later and get her two cats. I'll take them home with me. I know she'd want me to. I took care of them when she was in the

hospital last winter with that ankle."

"You take it easy, Edna."

Bob cruised in the police car the four blocks to Isabel's fine old house, passing along the block that housed a clutter of antique and craft shops, fairly recent additions to the town. They had brought a certain spirit of revival with them, and throngs of weekend curious, but Bob had mixed feelings about them. Fabian Bellamy, proprietor of The Long Tooth—Art & Artifacts, with an old-fashioned tooth-puller's sign as a logo in front, was putting down his awning as Bob drove by. His tight jeans, pink shirt open to the waist, and one earring, all irritated Bob unreasonably and he tried to quell the reaction. The flamboyant exterior concealed a perfectly ordinary businessman, no doubt. It was just this feeling he had that something important, a cornerstone, had been pulled out of the community with Mrs. Hatcher's death. Her son Frederick would come into everything, of course, and Frederick wasn't of this town. He lived in a city apartment twenty-five miles away. Bob pulled up in front of the house where a low red Italian sports car was already parked.

"I'm sure you don't mind my asking," Dan Palmer was saying as Bob entered the high-ceilinged living room. The police chief was standing very straight, trying to look taller, Bob could tell; the man with him was well over six feet. "But it is a case of murder."

"But you've got your man! You've made an arrest."

"Oh, Freddie, answer the man," a young woman drawled from the couch. She sat there smoking a cigarette, legs crossed. She had a bored look. Expensively dressed, Bob thought; her blonde hair and makeup were not the sort that came out of Edna's Beauty Barne either. "The man's talking about alibis," she said lazily. "You should watch more television, dear."

Frederick Hatcher shrugged irritably without looking at his wife. He was handsome and fit in a way that suggested lunchtime exercise at his squash club, but his face had a pouchy look.

"Well, what is it you want to know?"

"Just where you were last evening."

"As a matter of fact I had a sort of—working dinner—with members of my firm."

"Which is—"

"Fulworth, Pratt, Snader and Townes."

"Townes is Sandra," murmured the woman on the couch.

"I see. Your time is accounted for until when?"

"Oh, we left the restaurant around nine."

"Arriving home when?"

Frederick shot his wife a look. "I'm not sure. I did have some trouble getting a cab."

"Quite a *lot* of trouble, dear," the woman said mockingly.

Chief Palmer let it go for the moment and turned to her.

"What about your evening, Mrs. Hatcher?"

"Home all evening alone," she said pleasantly. "No alibi at all, I'm afraid."

"Will you be serious, Natalie?" her husband snapped. She smiled and glanced toward the archway where Bob stood. The look was frankly interested and Bob felt himself reddening. He looked around the room hastily. It was a handsome place, lofty and elegant—the way Bob always thought of the old lady herself. The furniture was quality stuff, not today's sort. And all around on the walls were paintings. Most of them of the town, the river that ran past it, this house, the main street, the church. Isabel's father had done them late in his life, Bob knew; the old man had become a familiar sight around town with his easel and paintbox. People said he had been shrewd with money. Like father, like daughter, Bob thought. And Isabel, widowed young, had stayed on in this house, cherishing and protecting its possessions. He glanced at Frederick Hatcher, world-weary and supercilious. The strain had run out, obviously.

Natalie Hatcher matched him. Expensive tastes there all right. He doubted that there would ever be quite enough money where Natalie was concerned. And outside, a foreign sports car that could eat up twenty-five miles in minutes. It would have been easy—for either of them. But of course then you came around to Rodney Pike sitting in the cooler, and you couldn't argue with the logic of *that*.

The Hatchers and Chief Palmer left for police headquarters and Bob stayed on at the house. "Better keep everyone out for now," Palmer said.

Alone in the house, Bob walked from room to room downstairs, then upstairs along the corridor, pausing only briefly before the door of Isabel's bedroom, locked by the police. At the end of the hall was a narrower door. He tried it and found it unlocked. Slowly he walked up steep dark stairs to the attic. Behind him two cats, a tortoiseshell and a gray and white tabby, who had been following on soft feet, sat side by side, staring after him.

Late in the afternoon Bob Fesco stood across from Edna's beauty shop, arms folded, and watched Fabian Bellamy, pink shirt, sandals and all, stroll up the block and go in. A newspaper was tucked under his arm. Edna, standing in the window with her shoulders slumped, saw Bob and waved. He crossed the street and she unlocked the door to let him in. When he glanced at the lock she said, "I'm just jumpy. But still I'd rather keep working. You know Fabian, I guess. I always take him after hours when he can get away."

Bob gave Fabian a nod. "I'll stay for a minute or two, Edna, if you want me to. I know you're feeling nervous."

"Thanks, Bob." Her red-rimmed eyes had a weary look.

"I hope no one suspects *me*," Fabian said archly. He went and sat in the chair. "No shampoo today, dear. Just a bit of a trim where it's ragged."

Bob watched as Edna went to work on him. Never had gone in for these unisex places himself—he still went to Pete McLaren's barber shop. Still, Edna did seem competent. He waited until she finished and Fabian got out of the chair. Edna took the cloth from around his neck and snapped it. With a swift motion Bob stepped forward and picked up Fabian's newspaper.

"Leaving this behind, Mr. Bellamy?" He opened it and a flutter of green bills spilled on the floor. He turned to Edna. "Pretty good pay for a trim, no shampoo." Dull angry red flooded Edna's face. Quietly Bob said, "Edna Barnes, I arrest you for the murder of Isabel Hatcher. You have the right to remain silent—"

Bob thought the chief had a haggard look, sitting across the desk from him. He felt pretty done in himself, and not happy, either, when he thought of Edna.

"The old man's paintings," Palmer said.

"Yep. I knew there had to be more than those few she had hanging downstairs. Old man Hatcher spent the last twenty years of his life painting. When I looked in the attic I was sure. I could see by the dust where the canvases had been stacked, but they'd all been cleaned out. I'm no judge of art, but I know stuff like that brings big money these days. Nostalgia, they call it. The shops here in town are full of it and I suppose in the city it brings even higher prices. If you have the right connections."

"Fabian Bellamy. We're holding him, too."

"A perfect go-between. But I still wasn't sure until I called Reverend Weller."

Palmer frowned. "Why him?"

"Because that production of *Pinafore* at the church hall last night wasn't what you'd call a big success. The flat that the Ladies' League painted for the ship fell over before they even got to the finale. Mrs. Goodspeed, who was playing Buttercup, went over with it and took quite a whack on the head. The whole thing wound up a disaster. But Edna had told me what a success it was—everyone pleased and clapping. Far from it, I'm afraid. So I guessed that Edna had gone to the church hall early to help with the hair and costumes but then had left, maybe halfway through the show."

"To steal the paintings? When she knew her aunt was at home?"

"No, she stole those six months ago when Isabel was in the hospital with a broken ankle. Fabian had been taking them to the city and selling them a few at a time. Then they'd split the money."

"So last night when she went there—"

"Yes. She went to murder, not steal. She wasn't in danger of being found out, you see, while her aunt was still limping around on that ankle. I can testify Isabel would never have attempted those steep attic stairs until she was pretty well recovered. But she was doing fine, stepping right along yesterday when I saw her. Edna knew it wasn't safe any more."

"But Rodney Pike certainly stole that money."

"Oh sure. Rodney's a sneak thief, but no killer. It must have seemed like a real break to Edna when she heard about that. Rodney broke in after she'd left."

The two men were silent for a moment. "What'd she say?" Palmer asked then. "When you arrested her?"

Bob thought back to Edna's plain features drawing into hardness and cynicism, all in that one instant. "Said she'd earned every penny of that money—said she knew it was all she'd ever get from the old lady. Nothing about the murder—" He got up and stretched wearily. "I'm going back down there."

"What for?"

"Going to pick up those two cats of Isabel's and take 'em home with me." He thought it might lift his spirits a little.

FICTION

THE INNOCENCE OF RACHEL CREWE

by Virginia Moriconi



Illustration by Arthur George

She came in answer to the "Help Wanted" notice which appeared in the *Daily Telegraph*. The moment he saw her, he thought she just might be made for the job. She was slight, but not dwarfed by her lack of girth or inches, her hair was pulled tight away from her forehead and securely held in place by an elastic band at the back of her head. Her eyes, in hornrimmed glasses, looked dark and huge but that, he thought, might be put down to a magnifying effect of the lenses; her hands and feet were slim and finely shaped.

"Have you ever worked in a bookshop before?" he said.

"No," she said, "I haven't. I hoped you would give me a try because I need the money."

"There's very little money in this business," he said.

To that she made no reply and there was an awkward pause in which either of them might have been framing questions and discarding them before they were uttered.

"What's your name?" he said, at last.

"Rachel Crewe," she said. "Yours, I suppose, is Jonathan Wyatt."

"No, that was my father's name," he said. "Mine is Lucas. Lucas Wyatt."

There was no more conversation to be invented standing on the threshold, and Lucas Wyatt gestured vaguely toward the interior, which she took to mean that he wished her to step inside.

Inside, there were books everywhere—in the bookcases that lined the walls, on tables, on chairs, in piles on the floor. Even the telephone stood on a heap of them.

"I must explain," he said, "that I'm not a run-of-the-mill bookseller. Which is to say that I won't handle what doesn't interest me. But I will and do buy up whole libraries when there's been a death or a division in a family, if the library reflects—at least in part—my own taste in authors or periods or subjects.

"My father was the same. Jonathan Wyatt, Ltd., has been known for fifty years as a place where a highly selective reader is most likely to find either what he may have been looking for—usually in vain—or an agreeable surprise. But, as you can see, things have got out of hand."

"There is a certain amount of confusion," said Rachel.

"There's nothing but confusion," Lucas said. "However, I've leased three rooms upstairs and the bookcases are already in. So it was my plan to close for the month of August—we're almost at

the end of July now—and put these books in order, fiction with fiction, poetry with poetry, et cetera. But then it occurred to me that I couldn't possibly do it alone, in such a short space of time, and furthermore that I really could use an assistant—someone to care for the shop when I'm on a buying spree, to help with the accounts, or just to be upstairs when I'm downstairs and vice versa.

"Can you read and write?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "I took a first in Greats at Oxford."

"Then your gifts will be wasted here," said Lucas.

"Perhaps not. The whole affair hangs or falls on whether you give me a chance."

When Jonathan Wyatt, Ltd., re-opened on the first of September, the shop was in perfect order and Lucas's sales quadrupled, since his "highly selective" readers could find at a glance the very book or author they had been seeking. He and Rachel had worked almost without respite from eight in the morning until well past midnight, seven days a week, for the whole of August. Rachel had bought a small hand vacuum cleaner and, for the first time in decades, the books on the shelves were not only in appropriate company, they were also clean. By the middle of September, Lucas felt he had something to celebrate and he asked her to dine with him, on the coming Saturday evening.

Sharp at seven thirty, he picked her up at the flat she shared with two other girls, and blushed when he saw her. She was wearing black, with very dark stockings, and very thin, needle-heeled black pumps. Only a broad coral bracelet and a pale turquoise shawl enlivened her costume. Her hair fell to her shoulders, where it curled softly at the ends, and she had left her glasses off, so that he might drown in the luminescent pools of her dark eyes.

As they had worked, side by side, he had come to know her as a fellow-laborer very well indeed. Her instant recognition of a truly rare book had invariably pleased him, and her suggestion that they save a large table on the first floor for books that she regarded as junk—to be offered for almost nothing, simply to clear the decks—had met with his instant approval. But her methods of attack, her stamina, her tireless application to the job in hand, her silent industry had told him nothing about her private self. By the end of that Saturday evening, he had fallen in love with her for, when she was not driving herself to the utmost in physical exertion,

she was relaxed, trusting, a wonderful listener, and quick with a riposte, whenever he gave her an opening. By October, he felt that he must have her at all costs, and he asked her to marry him.

"We know so little about each other," she said. "Would you come down for a weekend and stay with my father and mother?"

"And apply to your father for your hand?" he said, half-joking. "What does he do, by the way?"

"He's an historian, *au fond*," she said, "but his best works are his biographies. You have them all."

"So he's Langdon Crewe," said Lucas. "Why didn't you tell me that?"

"You never asked me," said Rachel.

Dr. Crewe was cutting dahlias when the postman arrived. He thrust the flowers into a jug of water, put the kettle on to boil, and shortly appeared in his wife's morning room, with a tray.

"Post and elevenses," he said. "There's a letter from Rachel on the top of the pile."

"What does it say?" said Mrs. Crewe.

"I don't know," said her husband. "Since it's addressed to both of us, I thought I'd give you the pleasure of opening it."

Rachel's letters had always come straight to the point, and this one was no exception.

"My employer, Lucas Wyatt—about whom I've written—has asked me to marry him," she wrote. "May I bring him down for a short weekend on Saturday next?"

Mrs. Crewe read it and handed it to her husband. The habitual want of color in her face had given way to an eggshell white and her fingers trembled as she stirred her tea.

"Time out of mind we've asked ourselves how we'd feel—how we *should* feel—when it came to this," said her husband. "For years we've been agreed—"

"Up to this minute the question was hypothetical," said Mrs. Crewe.

"Estelle," said Dr. Crewe, "we can't tell Rachel's young man what we don't know."

"But now that we must come to a decision," she said, "ought we not to consider confiding our suspicions, give him the benefit of a choice?"

"Our suspicions have debased us for years," Dr. Crewe said. "Rachel has distinguished herself many times over. . . ."

Mrs. Crewe, who had been on the verge of cardiac failure for a long time, swallowed the two pills her husband had fetched from the bathroom.

"Now," he said, "it's a lovely morning. May I carry you downstairs to the garden? Both the roses and the dahlias will drive the old cobwebs from your reflections."

For his sake, Mrs. Crewe exclaimed over the dahlias, delighted in the roses, still exuberantly blooming so late, and smiled at him as she had used to smile, years ago. But as soon as he had attacked the dahlias—for the postman had interrupted him at the beginning of his labors—Mrs. Crewe closed her eyes. In the dark chambers of her mind, it was a harsh, November morning, nearly fifteen years ago.

"Mildred," she had said, "Miles is building a fort and Rachel's doing a jigsaw puzzle. Shall we fold the sheets together, so that you can damp them now and iron them in the afternoon?"

Once in the laundry, once the sheets were folded, Mildred had a host of small problems. The hot water tap dripped constantly, all for the want of a washer, Dr. Crewe's shirts were in rags but, with Mrs. Crewe's permission, she could turn the collars, Miles's blue pullover had a gaping rip but, since Mrs. Crewe had made it, surely she had an extra screw of yarn for mending, somewhere about. On and on they prattled, for Mrs. Crewe was devoted to Mildred, who had come when her heart had first gone back on her, after Miles was born—and was profoundly thankful for the interest she took in all the household affairs.

It was some twenty minutes or half an hour before she went back to the nursery. Neither of the children was there. The wind was thrusting and moaning in the bare boughs of the poplars and a fine rain was spitting on the window sills. Mrs. Crewe went from room to room, calling the children, but soon it was clear that they were not in the house. Alarmed, she went downstairs again, to find Mildred.

"They can't have gone out in this," said Mildred, looking sharply out the window.

"They're not here," said Mrs. Crewe.

"Perhaps Rachel took it into her head to visit Mrs. Reade," Mildred said. "Let's see if their outdoor things are missing."

But their outdoor things were not missing and a telephone call to Mrs. Reade assured them that Rachel and Miles had not come to call on her.

Frantic, Mrs. Crewe threw on a coat and searched the grounds. Mildred, almost as much upset since, although Rachel was seven, Miles was only three, joined her in the herb garden.

"Have you been down to the river?" she said.

It had been raining for the best part of a month and the river was ugly and swollen—risen to within an inch of its banks and tearing at the snarls of the willows.

"Miles would never have gone to the river," said Mrs. Crewe. "He's frightened to death of it. Even in July, it was all his father could do to get him to go out in the boat."

As they scanned the countryside in every direction, they suddenly caught sight of Rachel, her hair, her clothes dripping wet, running toward them in her stocking feet.

"Miles is in the river," she said, shuddering in the wicked wind. "I can't get him out."

Mrs. Crewe and Mildred raced to the river's bank, but there was no sign of him.

"It's no use looking upstream," said Mildred. "If he's fallen in, he's gone downstream, with the current."

An hour later, they had abandoned the search. Mildred had stripped Mrs. Crewe, bundled her into her fleeciest dressing gown, laid her on the library sofa by the fire, given her the heart pills, and called the police. Thereafter, she gave Rachel a hot bath, dried her hair, wrapped her in warm clothes, and made her a cup of hot chocolate.

Late that afternoon, the little boy's body was found, caught in a tangle of roots, three miles downstream. Mrs. Crewe, delirious with terror until the tiny corpse was discovered, lapsed into a glazed silence more terrible than her piercing anguish. Dr. Crewe, long since notified, called the family doctor, who sent for an ambulance at once. He had meant to accompany his wife to the hospital, but a police inspector had arrived, and Dr. Jerrold followed the ambulance in his stead.

"We'll have to get to the bottom of this," said the inspector. "Your

housekeeper tells me that the child was scared stiff of the water."

"He was," said Dr. Crewe. "We couldn't make it out. But he was only three. We expected he'd outgrow his panic."

"Yet on a day like today, of all days, he *chose* to go to the very edge of the river?" said the inspector, whose name was Barnes.

"It makes no sense," Dr. Crewe said.

"Your daughter," said Barnes, "insists that he ran down there of his own accord, slipped over the bank, and that, try as she might, she couldn't pull him out."

"She's the only witness," said Dr. Crewe. "My wife and my housekeeper were busy in the laundry for quite some time. My wife was certain that the children were playing happily in the nursery—Miles with a box of blocks, building a castle, and Rachel with a jigsaw puzzle. It never crossed her mind that either of them would leave the house in this weather."

"If a stranger had come by?" said the inspector.

"Rachel made no reference to a stranger," said Dr. Crewe.

"By this evening, I will have the autopsy report," the inspector said. "Tomorrow morning, I'll go over the ground with your daughter again. Possibly, shocked as she is, a tremendous trifle of sorts has slipped her mind, momentarily."

Dr. Crewe spent the night by his wife's bed in the hospital.

"She understands that Miles is dead," said Dr. Jerrold. "If she wants to talk about it, I don't think it can do her much harm, for a few minutes, here and there. It might even help her a little. Nurse Patton will be right at your side."

At home, Mildred took Rachel into her own bed and presently the little girl was asleep.

In the morning, Mrs. Crewe asked what the police had made of it. She seemed to be holding herself at a great distance from her husband and he wondered if she were still much subdued by the medication she was being given. She made it perfectly clear, however, that she wished to speak to the police officer in charge of the proceedings, and Dr. Jerrold gave his consent to that, provided the interview was short.

"Tell her the truth," he said to the inspector. "She's too highly strung not to know at once if you lie to her, and if she feels that she can't trust you, her life will be at even greater risk."

The inspector had just reached the hospital. Although he had

hoped to interrogate Rachel, for the second time, shortly after her breakfast, he had had to wait until midday when her father came home to see if she was bearing up under the strain. Then, in Dr. Crewe's presence, he had questioned her intensively, trying to reconstruct the events leading up to the tragedy. At length, he was satisfied that, at least for the present, Rachel could not—or would not—shed any more light on the matter. He went down to the river, hoping to find, somewhere along the bank, a sign or a trace he had previously overlooked, while Dr. Crewe returned to his wife. By the late afternoon, the inspector had arrived at the hospital, where he had a word with Dr. Jerrold before entering the room where Mrs. Crewe lay as if she had been carved in stone, and Dr. Crewe sat beside her, holding her cold hand in his.

"The medical examiner's findings are consistent with your daughter's story," said Inspector Barnes. "The marks on your son's wrists and arms—there are several of them, with heavy bruising—were made before he drowned. They are also consistent with another possibility—namely, that he was forced into the river."

"What is my daughter's story?" said Mrs. Crewe, whose eyes rested anxiously on his face as though she were struggling to bring him into focus. "Does it differ in any way from what she said immediately after we discovered that Miles was lost?"

"I daresay it does not," said the inspector. "She says, and I can't shake her, that she was so interested in her puzzle that—for some while at least—she never noticed her brother was gone. When she did see that he was missing, she ran downstairs, saw the door open, and, in the distance, she saw him running as fast as his legs would carry him to the river's edge. She caught up with him just too late and, although she got a grip on him two or three times, the water tore him away from her. She rushed, so she said, downstream, looking for him, and she saw him being turned by the tide once or twice before she lost sight of him altogether. Then she ran back to get help and met you and the housekeeper in the garden, scanning the distance in all directions."

Dr. Crewe had nothing to say to that, but Mrs. Crewe's gaze was still fixed on the inspector, still glittering with desperate inquiry.

"I can't believe that the front door was standing open," she said. "The draft would have gone right through the house, we would have felt it everywhere. Nor can I believe that Miles opened it by himself. I'm quite sure he wasn't tall enough to reach the handle."

"If that's the case," the inspector said, "we're concerned either with Rachel or with an outsider."

Mrs. Crewe ceased to study him, abruptly turning her head away. The day nurse motioned the inspector to the door and Dr. Crewe stepped out after him.

"There's more to this than meets the eye," said the inspector. "It will have to be disclosed at the inquest. Your wife's testimony can, of course, be taken in hospital."

"What are you holding back?" said Dr. Crewe.

"The rest of the medical examiner's report," the inspector said. "In brief, he continues with a note that the child's legs are deeply scratched by briars. The same briars, he affirms, as those he encountered when he followed the trail from your house to the river. There are thorns embedded in the legs and thighs. He concludes that, beyond a doubt, your son was dragged to his death."

"Must my wife know that?" said Dr. Crewe.

"It's a question you should put to your doctor," said the inspector. "At the inquest, the whole story will come out, so surely she will hear it, one day or another. It might be better if she were to learn of it here and now, where immediate, expert care is available."

"Rachel was badly scratched, too," Dr. Crewe said.

"So she was," said the inspector. "But Rachel's injuries can be made to fit either version of the event. If she's telling the truth, if she ran, hell for leather, to catch up with Miles, she would have been heedless of the briars; all the same, she would have been torn by them. If, on the other hand, it was she who dragged him to the river, she would have been almost as scratched as he."

The coroner's jury returned a verdict of murder, by a person or persons unknown, being unable to reconcile the thorns in the child's legs with an accidental death. That evening, Dr. Crewe and Dr. Jerrold met in Mrs. Crewe's hospital room.

"What are we to make of it?" said Dr. Crewe.

"Two possibilities come to mind," Dr. Jerrold said. "The first is that Rachel was, as she says, so taken up with her puzzle that she didn't notice when Miles slipped away, and when she did appreciate that he was missing, she ran to the river—the only danger point in your terrain. Miles, hearing her running after him, may have scratched his own legs on the briars. It may have been nothing but a prank to him. But with Rachel at his heels, he may have mis-

judged the footing on the bank and then, just as she says, she may have grabbed him, lost him, and seen him being turned and tossed downstream.

"The second possibility is that someone whom the children knew and trusted lured them out, and Rachel is protecting him—or her—for reasons of her own."

"There's a third possibility," said Mrs. Crewe.

"Is there?" said Dr. Jerrold.

"Rachel herself might have dragged him to the river," Mrs. Crewe said. "Miles would have gone anywhere with Rachel."

"It's unthinkable," Dr. Crewe said.

"Is that your belief, Estelle?" said Dr. Jerrold, to Mrs. Crewe.

For answer, Mrs. Crewe was racked with sobs, such heartsick, shaking sobs as to leave her husband and Dr. Jerrold in no doubt that such was, indeed, her reconstruction of the catastrophe.

The next day, Dr. Jerrold and Dr. Crewe came together once again around Mrs. Crewe's bed.

"I think," said Dr. Jerrold, "that no matter what any of the three of us imagines or accepts, it would be wise to put Rachel in therapy with a psychiatrist, trained to work with children. If she's protecting an unknown stranger, the burden will become increasingly heavy—too much for a child to bear. If she is, in fact, responsible for Miles's death, her only salvation may be in confession. In the meantime—"

"In the meantime?" Dr. Crewe said.

"In the meantime," said Dr. Jerrold, "Estelle will have to stay here for six weeks or two months at the very least. Now, Rachel adores her Uncle David and his wife, does she not?"

"How could she help it?" said Dr. Crewe. "They're childless and they spoil her morning, noon, and night. Somehow she caught their fancy as Miles never did. Perhaps because Rachel *does* love to be loved."

"Would they take her for a while?" Dr. Jerrold said. "Get her away from the scene of the disaster, spoil her morning, noon, and night, whilst I try to find a man in London who could make time for her?"

"Of course they would," said Dr. Crewe. "They've already offered to take her away from the house and all its reminders."

Rachel stayed for three months with her mother's brother, David,

and his wife, Diana, whose cottage in the Cotswolds was not far from the Crewes' own property. They did spoil her, and comforted her much more than either of her parents, in their anguish, could have done. For David and Diana Wheaton were convinced that Rachel was shielding someone else—although they had no notion of who that someone else might be—and they took it for granted that she was heartbroken at the loss of her baby brother. In return, Rachel openly worshipped them and did, as her Aunt Diana said, more chores in a day than she herself could do in a month of Sundays.

Twice a week, Dr. Crewe drove her up to London for a visit with a psychiatrist whose name was Middleton. Often, betraying more anxiety than he wished, Dr. Crewe asked her if Dr. Middleton was an easy man to get along with.

"He's very kind," said Rachel.

"Do you talk to him?" said her father.

"I answer his questions," Rachel said. "And sometimes he talks to me."

After Dr. Middleton had seen her for a year, he requested an interview with her parents. Dr. Jerrold judged Mrs. Crewe fit for the trip to London, and she and her husband met Dr. Middleton in his office.

"I must tell you," said Dr. Middleton, "that I have got nowhere with Rachel. At the very least, after hearing a full report of the accident from Dr. Jerrold, and from reading the medical examiner's findings, I expected to be myself satisfied that either Rachel was indeed protecting some third person, or was herself the instrument of her brother's death. But during a year in which she has seemed quite open with me, I have come to no conclusion. With very young children, one cannot harp on the same question indefinitely, and many times Rachel and I have discussed all sorts of other subjects. I have learnt, in particular, that she is intensely attached to both of you and almost as intensely attached to her uncle and his wife. She is, I think, a person capable of depths of emotion rare in most of us. She also speaks tenderly of her brother, but she quickly admits that she hates to talk about him since, whenever she thinks of him, it brings back the memory of the terrible day on which he drowned.

"When I have thought the moment propitious, however, I have

led her back to the events of that morning and her story has never varied, either in its components or in its affect. She missed him, she ran to look for him, she saw him making for the river, she caught him, when he had fallen in, by his arms, by his wrists, but eventually the force of the water wrenched him from her grasp. Given the evidence of the scratches and the thorns in his legs, I know she's lying. But whether to mask her own involvement or that of some other person I cannot even guess.

"My suggestion is that you discontinue these appointments with me. Possibly one of my colleagues might be more effective at getting at the truth, but I doubt it. My own feeling is that Rachel, over the last year, has hardened her story to the point where she may even have come to believe in it. If so, no one will succeed in pulling it apart. In which case, her best chance of developing into a well-rounded, responsible person lies in being accepted by her parents and by her uncle and her aunt just as she is, and encouraged to grow up as if nothing unusual had ever happened to her. It might, conceivably, be more harmful to keep the wound open—for it *is* a wound, whatever the truth behind it—than to let it heal over. Whatever *did* occur on that morning, I feel certain that nobody will ever know it from Rachel and, in every respect, bar that particular fragment of her history, I've found her a normal, uncommonly self-possessed, intelligent, loving, and responsive child."

Dr. Crewe was himself unable to believe that his beloved daughter—for Rachel had his heart as no one else had ever done—could have drowned her brother. Mrs. Crewe, on the other hand, was convinced that Rachel had done just that, and being an exceptionally sensitive woman, she easily imagined that Rachel's remorse must be unremitting—wherefore she gave her whole self to comforting and strengthening her child. But although Dr. Crewe and his wife wrestled with differing interpretations of the little boy's death, his loss was agony to both of them and, without Mildred, who constantly suggested pastimes—new curtains for Dr. Crewe's library, a delphinium border along the drive, painting lessons for Rachel—they would have been at a loss for the small talk of happy families and clumsy with the little girl, being torn by pitiful or protective sentiments. Often Rachel's uncle, David, or her aunt, Diana, drove by to "borrow" her and, without Rachel, the Crewes drew closer to themselves, finding some ease from pain, the one in

the other. When Rachel was nearly nine, David and Diana Wheaton came by elated with their news. Childless for ten years, Diana was expecting a baby.

"I shall be scared to death of it when it comes," said Diana. "You must lend me Rachel for weeks on end to give me the courage to do all the frightful things that babies need. I know one's *not* supposed to drop them."

"Your Aunt Diana's quite beside herself," said Rachel's Uncle David. "You will come and steady her, won't you, ducks?"

"I'd be quite scared of a baby myself," said Rachel. "I was even scared when Tabitha had kittens. I was sure someone would step on one of them."

"There," said her Uncle David. "Rachel's just read us chapter number one. We must not put the baby on the floor."

Rachel went to see her Aunt Diana and the baby—a little boy called William—in the hospital. Often, on weekends, her father took her to call on her uncle and aunt, and Rachel seemed overawed by the infant. Gay and outgoing with the Wheatons, she regarded the baby with the greatest gravity.

"You have to be awfully, awfully careful of him, don't you?" she said.

"We don't even smile at him," said her Uncle David, who was playing cat's cradle with her. "We're afraid he'll think we're flip-pant."

During the summer, Mrs. Crewe took an unexpected turn for the worse, and once again she went into hospital.

"Well," said Diana Wheaton to Dr. Crewe, "why don't you look on it as a blessing of sorts? Give Mildred a holiday—God knows she deserves one—and send Rachel to us."

One fine July morning David Wheaton had gone to work—he was a merchant banker—while Rachel was sitting on the steps outside the kitchen door, shelling the peas that she had just picked for their lunch, as her Aunt Diana wheeled William, in his pram, outdoors into the clearing in front of the house. William was nine months old and he loved to rock on his hands and knees. Mrs. Wheaton put the brake on the pram, which she had parked well back from the drive which curved up a steep hill to the entrance. Presently, the telephone rang and she went to answer it.

It was Rachel's mother, who was calling from the hospital, eager for news of her daughter and equally eager to let her sister-in-law know how very much better she was and how soon she hoped to go home. On and on they chatted until Mrs. Crewe said she must ring off, since Dr. Jerrold had just arrived.

Mrs. Wheaton went out to see if William was tolerably happy. To her horror, the pram was not where she had left it, and looking wildly about, she saw it, overturned, at the foot of the drive. Stricken, she ran to rescue the baby, and when she had brought him back indoors, she had a glimpse, through the opening into the kitchen, of Rachel sitting on the steps, shelling the last of the peas.

William lived for ten days, unconscious, with a fractured skull. Diana Wheaton almost lost her reason.

"It's all my fault," she said, over and over. "He *would* rock, he loved to rock. The brake must have given way."

Rachel wept in her Uncle David's arms. No one had yet given up hope for William and David Wheaton tried to reassure her. That evening, her father drove by and took her back home, leaving the Wheaton household to its agonizing hopes and fears. After William died, and before Mrs. Crewe was discharged from the hospital, Mrs. Reade, the Crewes' next door neighbor, asked Dr. Crewe to call on her.

"I thought perhaps it would be best if you heard the news from me," she said, seeing him comfortable with a whisky and soda. "The whole village is talking about the Wheaton tragedy and now, for the first time, people are talking openly about Rachel. They're saying that she *must* have drowned Miles and killed that poor baby. I've heard it on all sides, and it's occurred to me that there's a facet of this situation which may not have struck you, or may have been overlaid by your doubts and your own bereavement.

"Miles was a clown. He liked nothing better than to make himself ridiculous and everybody loved to laugh at him. Everybody, that is to say, but Rachel. When Miles was holding the floor, when the whole world was laughing with him, Rachel was *not* amused.

"After I'd first heard about the drowning, I couldn't believe that Rachel had had anything to do with it and most, if not all, of the village agreed with me. But now the Wheaton baby has died and people—myself included—are beginning to have second thoughts. They *count* for nothing, but they're there.

"You know I love Rachel," she said. "Everybody has found it

impossible *not* to love Rachel, but I think, for her sake, for Mrs. Crewe's sake, for your own sake, you ought to get her out of the village. You ought to sell the house and go away, Dr. Crewe."

Sick with disbelief, underlying a dreadful suspicion, Dr. Crewe went to visit his wife, who had had a relapse once she had heard of the baby's death.

"So," said Mrs. Crewe, faintly, "it's happened again."

Dr. Crewe said nothing. Images crowded his mind, clearly, rapidly. He could see Rachel, racing around the house, letting the brake off the pram, and giving it a vicious shove at the top of the drive. If he closed his eyes, he kept hearing Mrs. Reade's kindly voice, urging him to understand that Rachel's loves went too deep to admit any rivalry.

"She's an enormously possessive child," Mrs. Reade had said. "Kindness itself, when she knows she's loved, and racked by jealousy of the least invader. I could see that for myself when she and Miles used to come by for biscuits or fudgecake, yet I *couldn't* believe that she'd brought about Miles's death. But I should have believed it. I should have warned Mrs. Wheaton."

Dr. Crewe moved Mildred and Mrs. Crewe and Rachel back to Oxford, where he had grown up, where he and his wife had lived after they were married, until Rachel was on the way. In Oxford, the only talk about Rachel was how brilliantly she was doing in school, and Dr. Crewe found some surcease in the senior common room at Magdalen. David Wheaton took a leave of absence and went to France with Diana. When they came home, they stopped in Oxford.

"I suppose," said Diana, after Rachel had gone to bed, "that you had to get Rachel out of there. Village tongues are long and sharp. But Rachel had nothing to do with it. It was my fault. My fault entirely."

When the Wheatons had left, Mrs. Crewe reached for her husband's hand and held it tightly.

"Now you know, don't you?" she said.

"I can't admit it," said Dr. Crewe. "Not to you, not to myself. I can't admit it."

"You have your work," said Mrs. Crewe.

"I have you, too," he said. "and I have Rachel."

"We both have Rachel," said his wife. "But when she's grown up, when we can't watch over her any more—"

"Let us just try to live from day to day," said Dr. Crewe.

At first, they did live from day to day, then from week to week, month to month and, at last, from year to year. Rachel was brilliant, a serious, curious, indefatigable student. She was also exceptionally thoughtful, doing—when she had the time—innumerable small errands or jobs around the house, so that Mildred and her mother were neither of them unduly pressed. The long shadows of old sins, if old sins there had been, grew shorter and shorter. When she had taken her first in Greats, both her parents were overwhelmed by love and pride.

It had not been lost on her that they were very hard up. The small inheritance her father had brought to his marriage should have set up his family comfortably, even if historians—or biographers—were not usually liberally remunerated for their efforts. But ever since Mrs. Crewe's heart had gone back on her, after Miles was born, the expenses had been crippling. Mildred was a costly necessity, and Mrs. Crewe's special nurses and special medications were by no means fully covered by her health insurance. Thus it was that Rachel wanted work, at the first opportunity, and thus it was that she answered Lucas Wyatt's advertisement for help in the bookshop.

When she had fallen deeply in love with him, she was in some haste to take him home to her father and mother, since her mother had, once again, gone into hospital and the cardiologist in Oxford had been cruelly candid with herself and with her father.

"Mrs. Crewe's heart is filling up her whole chest wall," he said. "She's living on borrowed seconds and you should both begin to look ahead to the day when you will have to do without her. The next attack will almost certainly be fatal."

Doting on her parents, Rachel wanted Lucas to have known them both, before she lost her mother, and she was eagerly anticipating the coming weekend. After they had fallen in love, Rachel had confided her history to him. Step by step, she had taken him over the morning when Miles had drowned—repeating the same version she had always re-enacted—and she told him about the extraordinary death of her baby cousin, William.

"No one," she said, "ever directly accused me of being responsible for the catastrophes, but after William died we left the Cotswolds and moved back to Oxford. Both my parents and my uncle and

aunt were especially careful never to let me feel that I was involved in either disaster, but I knew that there were many people who supposed that I had done away with the children."

Lucas was horrified.

"What a childhood for a little girl," he said.

"Sometimes it was hard," said Rachel, "but with my family behind me, I outgrew it. In fact, I've never talked about it to a soul but you."

That same week, in Oxford, Rachel's parents were recalling the past, out loud, for the first time in many years.

"I think her fiancé should be told about it," said Mrs. Crewe. "Not warned, but told."

"And I think we should let the dead past bury its dead," said her husband. "Rachel couldn't have won the honors she has, had she been twisted, as once we wondered if she might be."

Mrs. Crewe could not let the matter rest and Dr. Crewe, worried sick about her illness, sent for Dr. Jerrold—a friend, as opposed to the cardiologist, who was, to the Crewes, simply a sophisticated machine—in the hope that he might be able to present to his sick wife the long ago under another light.

"Let's put the affair in a theoretical frame," Dr. Jerrold said. "Let's suppose, just for the moment, that Rachel had been formally accused of murdering Miles. No jury would have found against her. The evidence was wholly insufficient. Even the prosecuting attorney, in his heart of hearts, would have believed that she was shielding someone else. It's what I believe myself, and always have. Rachel lied, but she didn't kill."

"What about the Wheatons' baby?" said Mrs. Crewe.

"We must simply call it inexperience," Dr. Jerrold said. "Diana Wheaton herself has always taken the blame for that death."

"So you don't agree with Estelle?" said Dr. Crewe. "You wouldn't re-open these chapters so far behind us?"

"I would not," said Dr. Jerrold. "Rachel's subsequent record speaks for itself. She's a loving, dedicated, industrious young woman, and it would be wicked to risk the smallest blight on her present happiness."

The Crewes were enchanted by Lucas and warmed by the radiance that emanated from Rachel.

"I must confess," said Lucas, "that I'm rather second-hand, which

is to say that I've been married and divorced. My first wife was and is a charming woman, but we just didn't hit it off. So we were divorced three years ago and she remarried almost immediately after."

Dr. Crewe was almost as pale as his wife, upon that announcement, for the next question was apparent and he fully realized that Mrs. Crewe's life might hang in the balance of the reply.

"Had you children?" he said, as evenly as he could.

"We had a son," said Lucas. "But my wife has custody of him and since she lives in Los Angeles, I never see him. His stepfather is a fine man and probably makes a far more conscientious parent than I ever would have done."

"He doesn't come to visit you?" said Mrs. Crewe.

"Oh, no," said Lucas. "We were all quite agreed that his loyalties shouldn't be strained. After all, he was barely a year old when his mother and I parted company. In Jonathan's terms—his name is Jonathan—his mother's husband is, effectively, his father. It's all worked out very well for the child and for my wife, and now that Rachel is ready to throw in her lot with me, I almost believe that everything is for the best, in this best of all possible worlds."

"As you've seen for yourself," said Dr. Crewe, putting his wife to bed, "there's no danger. Not the very least."

"Let us pray," said Mrs. Crewe, but her color was better and quite shortly her husband knew, from her steady breathing, that she had fallen peacefully asleep.

Rachel and Lucas had been married for over a year and seemed as much in love as if they were still a courting couple. Often they drove to Oxford, just for tea—in order not to put too much stress on the household, not to overtax Rachel's mother.

Then there came an afternoon when Lucas telephoned and asked if he might possibly arrive towards teatime and spend the night. There was a Victorian library for sale, and he was anxious to make some considerable purchases.

"Rachel won't be with me," he said. "She'll be holding the fort right here."

Dr. and Mrs. Crewe were delighted to see him, Mildred had made a sumptuous high tea and was preparing an elegant dinner.

"This is the greatest pleasure," said Mrs. Crewe. "But you're

looking a little worn and tired, Lucas. Are you working too hard?" "No," he said. "I am a little frayed, but Rachel has seen me through the worst of it."

"Have you struck a run of bad luck?" said Dr. Crewe.

"That remains to be seen," Lucas said. "To put the matter as briefly as possible, two weeks ago my ex-wife and her husband were killed in a highway accident in California. Three days ago, her brother brought Jonathan, who's only five, home to me. It was the only solution, as you can imagine, but the child has lost what he thought of as his *real* parents. He's still dreadfully shocked and prone to exhausted tears, but Rachel's been a sort of fairy god-mother to him and, once he gets over the tragedy, I'm sure we can see that he's a happy little boy again. He's really very taking."

"Where is he now?" said Mrs. Crewe.

"Why, he's home, of course," said Lucas. "With Rachel."

Mrs. Crewe collapsed in her chair and Lucas sprang up to help his father-in-law.

"Never mind about my wife," said Dr. Crewe, in a voice so harsh and high that Lucas was profoundly startled.

"Go home," said Dr. Crewe. "Go home on two wheels. Drive straight through every red light, put the accelerator to the floor. For God's sake go! For God's sake make haste!"

The urgency of Dr. Crewe's commands left Lucas suddenly terrified. He ran for the door, sprang into his car, shot down the drive, and turned toward London. Dr. Crewe laid his dead wife on the sofa and himself stumbled into a chair. More than an hour went by before he had the strength to call Dr. Jerrold.

During the afternoon, Jonathan and Rachel had been making gingerbread men. Rachel allowed Jonathan to stick the raisins into the figures wherever he pleased, so that sometimes they stood for eyes or ears, noses or mouths, single or double lines of buttons. When they were baked and the kitchen was tidied up, Jonathan seemed pleased with his creations.

"And now," said Rachel, "I am going upstairs to run you a bath."

"I don't want a bath," said Jonathan.

"Wanting and having a bath are two different things entirely," Rachel said. "I'll run you a lovely deep one, and you can play at being a whale."

"I won't take a bath," said Jonathan. "I told you that."

"You'll take a bath," said Rachel, "because if you don't, when your father telephones—which he will, in about half an hour—I won't let you speak to him."

"You're horrid," said Jonathan. "I hate you."

"Don't be silly," Rachel said. "What you really mean is that you want to talk to your father."

"And if I do?" said Jonathan, on the verge of tears.

"You'll take a bath," said Rachel.

Jonathan followed her upstairs sulkily, but he began to undress as Rachel ran the bath.

"I've got a surprise for you," she said. "As soon as you're in the bathtub and I can hear you splashing, I'll bring it to you."

"What's the surprise?" said Jonathan.

"You just wait," Rachel said.

Lucas broke every law of the road, sped through red lights, overtook cars speeding around curves. By the time he reached the outskirts of London, darkness had long since fallen; well before he reached home the rain, which had been gathering all day long, was falling in sheets. Across the Thames the lamps on the opposite bank were a faint, yellow blur. Miraculously, he found a space to park directly in front of his house. There was still some traffic, but not a soul abroad on foot.

He turned the key in the latch in a furious hurry and the first sound he heard was of water running in the bathroom overhead. Then, over the rushing of the water, came Jonathan's voice.

"Do you mean I can play with it if I'm really good?" he said.

"Of course you can," said Rachel. "As soon as you're all clean and dry."

Listening to Rachel speak, her tone so sweet and carrying, Lucas stopped halfway up the staircase to catch his breath. The last thing he wanted to do was to burst in on his wife and his son in such a maniacal state when, clearly, things were proceeding so happily above. Overpowered by a spasm of shame, by the certain knowledge that, in his heart, he had been guilty of a most shocking disloyalty to the wife whom he had chosen because he had loved her as he had never loved any other person, he turned and crept down to their little sitting room where—his hands, his whole body shaking—he poured himself a stiff drink. Then he heard her voice again.

"I'm going downstairs for a minute," said Rachel. "Don't forget

to scrub your knees and your elbows."

Lucas slunk soundlessly to the far corner of the room, at a painful loss to explain his presence. He could hear Rachel coming down the stairs, hear the creak as she opened the door to the coat cupboard under the stairwell, and small noises therein. Shortly thereafter he could hear her moving briskly about the kitchen. Relieved not yet to have been discovered, he took a long pull at the glass in his hand and listened to her opening and closing a drawer, opening and closing another. After a moment or so, she went rapidly back up to Jonathan.

On silent feet, Lucas moved toward the fireplace and sat in his own armchair. Upstairs, he heard the slam of the bathroom door—a most ordinary, everyday noise, since the door was slightly warped; only a good slam would shut it, only a heave would re-open it. Rachel, he thought, was taking no chances that Jonathan, dripping wet, might be caught in a draft.

He was of half a mind to go, as cautiously as he had hidden himself, to pray that she would never learn of his precipitate return. In fact, he was already standing up before he realized that his abrupt arrival was not simply perfectly explicable, it was obligatory. He had left her mother lifeless, almost surely dead; it was his duty to break the news to her himself, to be there, to be sure that she was not alone with a new and naked grief.

Still conscience-stricken, but filled with a sharp, sad tenderness, he took his glass to the kitchen, noticing without really seeing them Rachel's overshoes standing by the back door, and beside them two large stones, like the ones she had been using in her rock garden. On a chair were her mackintosh and hat, and a flashlight. He put his glass in the sink, went up the stairs quietly, and walked into their bedroom. The bathroom door was still closed and not a sound came from behind it.

He felt a touch of wonderment at the sight of it: Jonathan usually made a lot of noise. Then, irresistibly, his gaze fixed itself on the shiny, black plastic rectangle lying on one side of their big bed. That he recognized immediately, still folded though it was. Opened up, it would prove to be an enormous sack, designed for refuse. Designed, indeed, for whatsoever was no longer wanted in the house.

MYSTERY CLASSIC



THE
CASE
OF THE
“**FLITT**
LANC”
by Arthur

I.

In none of the cases of investigation by Martin Hewitt which I have as yet recorded had I any direct and substantial personal interest. In the case I am about to set forth, however, I had some such interest, though legally, I fear, it amounted to no more than the cost of a smashed pane of glass. But the case in some ways was one of the most curious which came under my notice, and completely justified Hewitt's oft-repeated dictum that there was nothing, however romantic or apparently improbable, that had not happened at some time in London.

It was late on a summer evening two or three years back

that I drowsed in my armchair over a particularly solid and ponderous volume of essays on social economy. I was doing a good deal of reviewing at the time, and I remember well that this particular volume had a property of such exceeding toughness that I had already made three successive attacks on it, on as many successive evenings, each attack having been defeated in the end by sleep. Still something had been done on each evening, and now on the fourth I strenuously endeavored to finish the book. Late as it was my lamp had been lighted but an hour or so, for there had been light enough to read by, near the window, till well past nine o'clock. I was just beginning to feel conscious that the words before me were sliding about and losing their meanings, and that I was about to fall asleep after all, when a sudden crash and a jingle of broken glass behind me woke me with a start, and I threw the book down. A pane of glass in my window was smashed, and I hurried across

**ERBAT
ERS"**

Morrison

and threw up the sash to see, if I could, whence the damage had come.

I think I have somewhere said (I believe it was in describing the circumstances of the extraordinary death of Mr. Foggatt) that the building in which my chambers (and Hewitt's office) were situated was accessible—or rather visible, for there was no entrance—from the rear. There was, in fact, a small courtyard, reached by a passage from the street behind, and into this courtyard my sitting room window looked.

"Hullo there!" I shouted. But there came no reply. Nor could I distinguish anybody in the courtyard. Some men had been at work during the day on a drain pipe near the booth, and I reflected that probably their litter had provided the stone wherewith my window had been smashed. As I looked, however, two men came hurrying from the passage into the court, and going straight into the deep shadow of one corner, presently appeared again in a less obscure part, hauling forth a third man, who must have already been there in hiding. The man—who appeared, so far as I could see, to be smaller than either of his assailants—struggled fiercely, but without avail, and was dragged across toward the passage leading to the street be-

yond. But the most remarkable feature of the whole thing was the silence of all three men. No cry, exclamation or expostulation escaped any one of them. In perfect silence the two hauled the third across the courtyard, and in perfect silence he swung and struggled to resist and escape. The matter astonished me not a little, and the men were entering the passage before I found voice to shout at them. But they took no notice, and disappeared. Soon after I heard cab wheels in the street beyond, and had no doubt that the two men had carried off their prisoner.

I turned back into my room a little perplexed. It seemed probably that the man who had been borne off had broken my window, but why? I looked about on the floor and presently found the missile. It was, as I had expected, a piece of broken concrete, but it was wrapped up in a worn piece of paper, which had partly opened out again as it lay on my carpet, thus indicating that it had only just been hastily crumpled round the stone. But again, why? I disengaged the paper and spread it out. Then I saw it to be an apparently rather hastily written piece of manuscript music, of which a considerably reduced reproduction is given below.

This gave me no help. I turned the paper this way and that, but



could make nothing of it. There was not a mark on it that I could discover, except the music and the scrawled title, "Flitterbat Lancers," at the top. The paper was old, dirty, and cracked. What did it all mean?

It was not a message, but a hastily written piece of music, with no bars or time marked, just as might have been put down by somebody anxious to make an exact note of an air, the time of which he could remember. Moreover, it was years old, not a thing just written in a recent emergency.

I looked out of the window again, and then it seemed plain to me that the clinker and the paper could not have been intended for me personally, but had been flung at my window as being the only one that showed a light within a reasonable distance of the yard. Most of the windows about mine were those of offices, which had been deserted early in the evening.

Once more I picked up the

paper, and, with an idea to hear what the "Flitterbat Lancers" sounded like, I turned to my little pianette and strummed over the notes, making my own time and changing it as seemed likely. But I could make nothing of it, and could by no means extract from the notes anything resembling an air. I considered the thing a little more, and half thought of trying Hewitt's office door, in case he might still be there and could offer a guess at the meaning of my smashed window and the scrap of paper. It was most probable, however, that he had gone home, and I was about resuming my social economy when Hewitt himself came in. He had stayed late to examine a bundle of papers in connection with a case just placed in his hands, and now, having finished, came to find if I were disposed for an evening stroll before turning in—a thing I was in the habit of. I handed him the paper and the piece of concrete, observing, "There's a little job for you, Hewitt, instead of the stroll. What do those things mean?" And I told him the complete history of my smashed window.

Hewitt listened attentively, and examined both the paper and the fragment of paving. "You say these people made absolutely no sound whatever?" he asked.

"None but that of scuffling,

and even that they seemed to do quietly."

"Could you see whether or not the two men gagged the other, or placed their hands over his mouth?"

"No, they certainly didn't do that. It was dark, of course, but not so dark as to prevent my seeing generally what they were doing."

"And when you first looked out of the window after the smash, you called out, but got no answer, although the man you suppose to have thrown these things must have been there at the time, and alone?"

"That was so."

Hewitt stood for near half a minute in thought, and then said, "There's something in this; what, I can't guess at the moment, but something deep, I fancy. Are you sure you won't come out now?"

"On this my mind was made up. That dreadful volume had vanquished me altogether three times already, and if I let it go again it would haunt me like a nightmare. There was indeed very little left to read, and I determined to master that and draft my review before I slept. So I told Hewitt that I *was* sure, and that I should stick to my work."

"Very well," he said; "then perhaps you will lend me these articles?" holding up the paper and the stone as he spoke.

"Delighted to lend 'em, I'm sure," I said. "If you get no more melody out of the clinker than I did out of the paper you won't have a musical evening. Good night."

Hewitt went away with the puzzle in his hand, and I turned once more to my social economy, and, thanks to the gentleman who smashed my window, conquered. I am sure I should have dropped fast asleep had it not been for that.

II.

At this time my only regular daily work was on an evening paper, consequently it was not until lunch time that I had an opportunity of seeing Hewitt. I went to my own rooms first, however, and on the landing by my door I found the housekeeper in conversation with a shortish sunbrowned man with a goatee, whose accent at once convinced me that he hailed from across the Atlantic. He had called, it appeared three or four times during the morning to see me, getting more impatient each time. As he did not seem even to know my name the housekeeper had not considered it expedient to say when I was expected, nor indeed to give him any information about me, and he was growing irascible under the treatment. When I at last appeared, however, he

left her and approached me eagerly.

"See here, sir," he said, "I've been stumpin' these here durn stairs o' yours half through the mornin'. I'm anxious to apologise, I reckon, and fix up some damage."

He had followed me into my sitting room, and was now standing with his back to the fireplace, a dripping umbrella in one hand, and the forefinger of the other held up shoulder-high and pointing, in the manner of a pistol, to my window, which, by the way, had been mended during the morning, in accordance with my instructions to the housekeeper.

"Sir," he continued, "last night I took the extreme liberty of smashin' your winder."

"Oh," I said, "that was you, was it?"

"It was, sir—me. For that I hev come humbly to apologise. I trust the draught has not discommoded you, sir. I regret the accident, and I wish to pay for the fixin' up and the general inconvenience." He placed a sovereign on the table. "I 'low you'll call that square now, sir, and fix things friendly and comfortable as between gentlemen, an' no ill will. Shake."

And he formally extended his hand.

I took it at once. "Certainly," I said, "certainly. As a matter of fact you haven't inconveni-

enced me at all; indeed, there were some circumstances about the affair that rather interested me. But as to the damage," I continued, "if you're really anxious to pay for it, do you mind my sending the glazier to you to settle? You see it's only a matter of a half a crown or so at most." And I pushed the sovereign toward him.

"But then," he said, looking a trifle disappointed, "there's general discommodedness, you know, to pay for, and the general sass of the liberty to a stranger's winder. I ain't no down-easter—not a Boston dude—but I reckon I know the gentlemanly thing, and I can afford to do it. Yes. Say now, didn't I startle your nerves?"

"Not a bit," I answered laughing. "In fact you did me a service by preventing me going to sleep just when I shouldn't; so we'll say no more of that."

"Well—there was one other thing," he pursued, looking at me rather sharply as he slowly pocketed the sovereign. "There was a bit o' paper round that pebble that came in here. Didn't happen to notice that, did you?"

"Yes, I did. It was an old piece of manuscript music."

"That was it—just. Might you happen to have it handy now?"

"Well," I said, "as a matter of fact a friend of mine has it now. I tried playing it over once or twice, as a matter of curiosity,

but I couldn't make anything of it, and so I handed it to him."

"Ah!" said my visitor, watching me narrowly, "that's a nailer, is that 'Flutterbat Lancers'—a real nailer. It whips 'em all. Nobody can't get ahead of that. Ha, ha!" He laughed suddenly—a laugh that seemed a little artificial. "There's music fellers as 'lows to set right down and play off anything right away that can't make anything of the 'Flutterbat Lancers.' That was two of 'em that was monkeyin' with me last night. They never could make anythin' of it at all, and I was tantalising them with it all along till they got real mad, and reckoned to get it out o' my pocket and learn it off quiet at home, and stop all my chaff. Ha, ha! So I got away for a bit, and bein' a bit lively after a number of toothlotions (all three was much that way), just rolled it round a stone and heaved it through your winder before they could come up, your winder bein' the nearest one with a light in it. Ha, ha! I'll be considerable obliged if you'll get it from your friend right now. Is he stayin' hereabout?"

The story was so ridiculously lame that I determined to confront my visitor with Hewitt and observe the result. If he had succeeded in making any sense of the "Flutterbat Lancers" the scene might be amusing. So I answered at once, "Yes, his of-

fice is only on the floor below; he will probably be in at about this time. Come down with me."

We went down, and found Hewitt in his outer office. "This gentleman," I told him with a solemn intonation, "has come to ask for his piece of manuscript music, the 'Flutterbat Lancers.' He is particularly proud of it, because nobody who tries to play it can make any sort of tune out of it, and it was entirely because two dear friends of his were anxious to drag it out of his pocket and practise it over on the quiet that he flung it through my windowpane last night, wrapped round a piece of concrete."

The stranger glanced sharply at me, and I could see that my manner and tone rather disconcerted him. But Hewitt came forward at once. "Oh yes," he said. "Just so—quite a natural sort of thing. As a matter of fact I quite expected you. Your umbrella's wet—do you mind putting it in the stand? Thank you. Come into my private office."

We entered the inner room, and Hewitt, turning to the stranger, went on: "Yes, that is a very extraordinary piece of music, that 'Flutterbat Lancers.' I have been having a little practice with it myself, though I'm really nothing of a musician. I don't wonder you are anxious to keep it to yourself. Sit down."

The stranger, with a distrustful look at Hewitt, complied. At this moment Hewitt's clerk, Kerrett, entered from the outer office with a slip of paper. Hewitt glanced at it and crumpled it in his hand. "I am engaged just now," was his remark, and Kerrett vanished.

"And now," Hewitt said as he sat down and suddenly turned to the stranger with an intent gaze, "and now, Mr. Hoker, we'll talk of this music."

The stranger started and frowned. "You've the advantage of me, sir," he said; "you seem to know my name, but I don't know yours."

Hewitt smiled pleasantly. "My name," he said, "is Hewitt—Martin Hewitt, and it is my business to know a great many things. For instance, I know that you are Mr. Reuben B. Hoker, of Robertsville, Ohio."

The visitor pushed his chair back, and stared. "Well—that gits me," he said. "You're a pretty smart chap anyway. I've heard your name before, of course. And—and so you've been a-studyin' of the 'Flitterbat Lancers,' have you?" This with a keen glance in Hewitt's face. "Well, well, s'pose you have. What's your opinion?"

"Why," answered Hewitt, still keeping his steadfast gaze on Hoker's eyes, "I think it's pretty late in the century to be fishing about for the Wedlake jewels,

that's all."

These words astonished me almost as much as they did Mr. Hoker. The great Wedlake jewel robbery is, as many will remember, a traditional story of the sixties. I remembered no more of it at the time than probably most men do who have at some time or another read up the *causes célèbres* of the century. Sir Francis Wedlake's country house had been robbed, and the whole of Lady Wedlake's magnificent collection of jewels stolen. A man named Shiels, a strolling musician, had been arrested and had been sentenced to a long term of penal servitude. Another man named Legg—one of the comparatively wealthy scoundrels who finance promising thefts or swindles and pocket the greater part of the proceeds—had also been punished, but only a very few of the trinkets, and those quite unimportant items, had been recovered. The great bulk of the booty was never brought to light. So much I remembered, and Hewitt's sudden mention of the Wedlake jewels in connection with my broken window, Mr. Reuben B. Hoker and the "Flitterbat Lancers" astonished me not a little.

As for Hoker, he did his best to hide his perturbation, but with little success. "Wedlake jewels, eh?" he said; "and what's that to do with it, anyway?"

"To do with it?" responded Hewitt, with an air of carelessness. "Well, well, I had my idea, nothing more. If the Wedlake jewels have nothing to do with it, we'll say no more about it, that's all. Here's your paper, Mr. Hoker—only a little crumpled. Here also is the piece of cement. If the Wedlake jewels have nothing to do with the affair you may possibly want that too—I can't tell." He rose and placed the articles in Mr. Hoker's hand, with the manner of terminating the interview.

Hoker rose, and with a bewildered look on his face, and turned toward the door. Then he stopped, looked at the floor, scratched his cheek, and finally, after a thoughtful look, first at me and then at Hewitt, sat down again emphatically in the chair he had just quitted and put his hat on the ground. "Come," he said, "we'll play a square game. That paper *has* something to do with the Wedlake jewels, and, win or lose, I'll tell you all I know about it. You're a smart man—you've found out more than I know already—and whatever I tell you, I guess it won't do me no harm; it ain't done me no good yet, anyway."

"Say what you please, of course," Hewitt answered, "but think first. You might tell me something you'd be sorry for afterward. Mind, I don't invite

your confidence."

"Confidence be durned! Say, will you listen to what I say, and tell me if you think I've been swindled or not? There ain't a creature in this country whose advice I can ask. My \$250 is gone now, and I guess I won't go skirmishing after it any more if you think it's no good. Will you do so much?"

"As I said before," Hewitt replied, "tell me what you please, and if I can help you I will. But remember, I don't ask for your secrets."

"That's all right, I guess, Mr. Hewitt. Well, now, it was all like this." And Mr. Reuben B. Hooker plunged into a detailed account of his adventures since his arrival in London.

Relieved of repetitions, and put as directly as possible, it was as follows:—Mr. Hoker was a wagon-builder, had made a good business from very humble beginnings, and intended to go on and make it still a better. Meantime he had come over to Europe for a short holiday—a thing he had promised himself for years. He was wandering about the London streets on the second night after his arrival in the city, when he managed to get into conversation with two men at a bar. They were not very prepossessing men altogether, though flashily dressed. Very soon they suggested a game of cards. But Reuben B.

Hoker was not to be had in that way, and after a while they parted. The two were amusing fellows enough in their way, and when Hoker saw them again the next night in the same bar he made no difficulty of talking with them freely. After a time, and after a succession of drinks, they told him they had a speculation on hand—a speculation that meant thousands if it succeeded—and to carry out which they were only waiting for a paltry sum of £50. There was a house, they said, in which they were certain was hidden a great number of jewels of immense value, which had been deposited there by a man who was now dead. Exactly in what part of the house the jewels were to be found they did not know. There was a paper, they said, which was supposed to have contained some information, but as yet they hadn't quite been able to make it out. But that would really matter very little if once they could get possession of the house. Then they would simply set to work and search from the topmost chimney to the lowermost brick if necessary. Anyhow the jewels must be found sooner or later. The only present difficulty was that the house was occupied, and that the landlord wanted a large deposit of rent down before he would consent to turn out his present tenants and give them

possession at a higher rental. This deposit and other expenses, they said, would come to at least £50, and they hadn't the money. However if any friend of theirs who meant business would put the necessary sum at their disposal, and keep his mouth shut, they would make him an equal partner in the proceeds with themselves; and as the value of the whole haul would probably be something not very far off £20,000, the speculation would bring a tremendous return to the man who was smart enough to see the advantage of putting down his £50.

Hoker, very distrustful, sceptically demanded more detailed particulars of the scheme. But these the men (Luker and Birks were their names, he found, in course of talking) inflexibly refused to communicate.

"Is it likely," said Luker, "that we should give the 'ole thing away to anybody who might easily go with his £50 and clear out the bloomin' show? Not much. We've told you what the game is, and if you'd like to take a flutter with your £50, all right, you'll do as well as anybody, and we'll treat you square. If you don't—well, don't, that's all. We'll get the oof from somewhere—there's blokes as 'ud jump at the chance, I can tell you—only they're inconvenient

blokes to deal with, as I'll explain if you come in with us. Anyway we ain't goin' to give the show away before you've done somethin' to prove you're on the job, straight. Put your money in and you shall know as much as we do."

Then there were more drinks, and more discussion. Hoker was still reluctant, though tempted by the prospect, and growing more venturesome with each drink.

"Don't you see," said Birks, "that if we was a-tryin' to 'ave you we should out with a tale as long as yer arm, all complete, with the address of the 'ouse and all. Then I s'pose you'd lug out the pieces on the nail, without askin' a bloomin' question. More fool you, that's all. As it is, the thing's so perfectly genuine that we'd rather lose the chance and wait for some other bloke to find the money than run a chance of givin' the thing away. It ain't you wot'll be doin' a favor, mind. If it's anybody it's us. Not that we want to talk of favors at all, if you come to that. It's a matter o' business, simple and plain, that's all it is. If you're willin' to come in with the money that we can't do without—very well. If you ain't, very well too, only we ain't going to give the thing away to an outsider. It's a question of either us trustin' you with a chance of collarin' £20,000, or

you trustin' us with a paltry £50. We don't lay out no 'igh moral sentiments, we only say the weight o' money is all on one side. Take it or leave it, that's all. 'Ave another Scotch."

The talk went on and the drinks went on, and it all ended at "chucking-out time" in Reuben B. Hoker handing over five ten pound notes, with smiling, though slightly incoherent assurances of his eternal friendship for Luker and Birks.

In the morning he awoke to the realisation of a bad head, a bad tongue, and a bad opinion of his proceedings of the previous night. In his sober senses it seemed plain that he had been swindled. He had heard of the confidence trick, to which many Americans had unaccountably fallen victims (for to him the trick had always seemed very thin), and he had sworn that something better than the confidence trick would be required to get over *him*. But now there seemed no doubt that this was no more than the confidence trick over again, in a new and more impudent form. All day he cursed his fuddled foolishness, and at night he made for the bar that had been the scene of the transaction, with little hope of seeing either Luker or Birks, who had agreed to be there to meet him. There they were, however, and rather to his surprise, they made no

demand for money. They asked him if he understood music, and showed him the worn old piece of paper containing the manuscript "Flitterbat Lancers." The exact spot, they said, where the jewels were hidden was supposed to be indicated somehow and somewhere on that piece of paper. Hoker did not understand music, and could find nothing on the paper that looked in the least like a direction to a hiding place for jewels or anything else.

Luker and Birks then went into full particulars of their project. First, as to its history. The jewels were the famous Wedlake jewels, which had been taken from Sir Francis Wedlake's house in 1866 and never heard of again. A certain Jerry Shiels had been arrested in connection with the robbery, had been given a long sentence of penal servitude, and had died in jail. This Jerry Shiels was an extraordinarily clever criminal, and travelled about the country as a street musician. Although an expert burglar, he rarely perpetrated robberies himself, but acted as a sort of travelling fence, receiving stolen property and transmitting it to London or out of the country. He also acted as the agent of a man named Legg, who had money, and who financed any likely-looking project of a criminal nature that Shiels might

arrange or recommend. Luker and Birks explained that there were many men of this class, and that it was to them that they had referred on the previous evening, when they said that they were "blokes that would jump at the chance" of financing the present venture.

Jerry Shiels travelled with a "pardner"—a man who played the harp and acted as his assistant and messenger in affairs wherein Jerry was reluctant to appear personally. When Shiels was arrested he had in his possession a quantity of printed and manuscript music, and after his first remand his "pardner," Jemmy Snape, applied for the music to be given up to him in order, as he explained, that he might earn his living. No objections were raised to this, and Shiels was quite willing that Snape should have it, and so it was handed over. Now among this music was a small slip, headed "Flitterbat Lancers," which Shiels had shown to Snape before his arrest. In case of Shiels being taken Snape was to take this particular slip to Legg as fast as he could. The slip indeed carried about it, in some unexplained way which Legg understood, an indication of the place in which Shiels had concealed the bulk of the Wedlake jewels, and the whole proceeding was an ingenious trick in-

vented by Shiels (and used before, it was supposed) to communicate with Legg while under arrest.

Snape got the music, but, as chance would have it, on that very day Legg himself was arrested, and soon after was sentenced also to a term of years. Snape hung about in London for a little while and then emigrated. Before leaving, however, he gave the slip of music to Luker's father, a ragshop keeper, who was a friend of his, and to whom he owed money. He explained its history, and hoped that Luker senior would be able to recoup himself for the debt, and a good deal over. Then he went. Luker senior had made all sorts of fruitless efforts to get at the information concealed in the paper. He had held it to the fire to bring up concealed writing, had washed it, had held it to the light till his eyes ached, had gone over it with a magnifying glass—all in vain. He had got musicians to strum out the notes on all sorts of instruments, backwards, forwards, alternately, and in every other way he could think of. If at any time he fancied a resemblance in the resulting sound to some familiar song tune, he got that song and studied all its words with loving care, upside-down, right-side up—every way. He took the words "Flitterbat Lancers" and transposed the

letters in all directions, and did everything else he could think of. In the end he gave it up and died. Now lately, Luker junior had been impelled with a desire to see into the matter. He had repeated all the parental experiments, and more, with chemicals, and with the same lack of success. He had taken his "pal" Birks into his confidence, and together they had tried other experiments still—usually very clumsy ones indeed—till at last they began to believe that the message had probably been written in some sort of invisible ink which the subsequent washings and experiments had erased altogether. But he had done one other thing; he found the house which Shiels rented at the time of his arrest, and in which a good quantity of stolen property—not connected with the Wedlake case—was discovered. Here, he argued, if anywhere, Jerry Shiels had hidden the jewels. There was no other place where he could be found to have lived, or over which he had sufficient control to warrant his hiding valuables therein. Perhaps, once the house could be properly examined, something about it might give a clue as to what the message of the "Flitterbat Lancers" meant. At any rate, message or none, anybody in possession of the house, with a certain amount of patience,

secrecy, and thoroughness, could in time make himself master of every possible hiding place, and could completely excavate the back yard. The trouble was that the house was occupied, and that money was wanted to get possession. It was with the view of providing this that they decided to broach the subject to Hoker.

Hoker of course was anxious to know where the house in question stood, but this Luker and Birks would on no account inform him. "You've done your part," they said, "and now you leave us to do ours. There's a bit of a job about gettin' the tenants out. They won't go, and it'll take a bit of time before the landlord can make them. So you just hold your jaw and wait. When we're safe in the 'ouse, and there's no chance of anybody else pokin' into the business, then you can come and help find the stuff if you like. But you ain't goin' to 'ave a chance of puttin' in first for yourself this journey, you bet."

Hoker went home that night sober, but in much perplexity. The thing might be genuine after all; indeed there were many little things that made him think it was. But then if it were, what guarantee had he that he would get his share, supposing the search turned out successful? None at all. But then it struck him for the first

time that these jewels, though they may have lain untouched so long; were stolen property after all. The moral aspect of the affair began to trouble him a little, but the legal aspect troubled him more. That consideration, however, he decided to leave over, for the present at any rate. He had no more than the word of Luker and Birks that the jewels (if they existed) *were* those of Lady Wedlake, and Luker and Birks themselves only professed to know from hearsay. At any rate his £50 was gone where he felt pretty sure he would have a difficulty in getting it back from, and he determined to wait events. But at least he made up his mind to have some little guarantee for his money. In accordance with this resolve he suggested, when he met the two men the next day, that he should take charge of the slip of music and make an independent study of it. This proposal, however, met with an instant veto. The whole thing was now in their hands, Luker and Birks laid it down, and they didn't intend letting any of it out. If Hoker wanted to study the "Flitterbat Lancers" he could do it in their presence, and if he were dissatisfied he could go to the next shop. Altogether it became clear to the unhappy Hoker that now he had parted with his money he was altogether at the mercy

of these fellows, if he wished to get any share of the plunder, or even to see his money back again. And if he made any complaint, or if the matter became at all known, the affair would be "blown upon," as they expressed it, and his money would be gone. Mostly, though, he resented their bullying talk, and he determined to get even in the matter of the music. He resolved to make up a piece of paper, folded as like the slip as possible, and substitute one for the other at their next meeting. Then he would put the "Flutterbat Lancers" in some safe place and face his fellow conspirators with a hand of cards equal to their own. He carried out his plan the next evening with perfect success, thanks to a trick of "passing" cards which he had learned in his youth, and thanks also to the contemptuous indifference with which Luker and Birks had begun to regard him. He got the slip in his pocket and left the bar. He had not gone far, however, before Luker discovered the trick, and soon he became conscious of being followed. He looked for a cab, but he was in a dark street, and no cab was near. Luker and Birks turned the corner and began to run. He saw they must catch him, and felt no doubt that if they did he would lose the slip of paper, the £50, and everything. They were big active fel-

lows, and could probably do as they liked with him—especially since he could not call for help without risking an exposure of their joint enterprise. Everything depended now on his putting the "Flutterbat Lancers" out of their reach, but where he could himself recover it. Then it would form a sort of security for his share of the venture. He ran till he saw a narrow passageway on his right, and into this he darted. It led into a yard where stones were lying about, and in a large building before him he saw the window of a lighted room a couple of floors up. It was a desperate expedient, but there was no time for consideration. He wrapped a stone in the paper and flung it with all his force through the lighted window. Even as he did it he heard the feet of Luker and Birks as they hurried down the street. The rest of the adventure in the court I myself saw.

Luker and Birks kept Hoker in their lodgings all that night. They searched him unsuccessfully for the paper, they bullied, they swore, they cajoled, they entreated, they begged him to play the game square with his pals. Hoker merely replied that he had put the "Flutterbat Lancers" where they couldn't easily find it, and that he intended playing the game square so long as they did the same. In

the end they released him, apparently with more respect for his cuteness than they had before entertained, advising him at any rate to get the paper into his possession as soon as he could. With this view he repaired again to the scene of his window-smashing exploit, and having ascertained the exact position of the window in the building, began his morning's attack on my outer door.

"And now," said Mr. Hoker, in conclusion of his narrative, "perhaps you'll give me a bit of Christian advice. You're up to as many moves as most people over here. Am I playin' a fool game running after these toughs, or ain't I? I wouldn't have told you what I have, of course, if it wasn't clear that you'd got hold of the hang of the scheme somehow. Say, now, is it all a swindle?"

Hewitt shrugged his shoulders. "It all depends," he said, "on your friends Luker and Birks, as you may easily see for yourself. They may want to swindle you of your money and of the proceeds of the speculation, as you call it, or they may not. I'm afraid they'd like to, at any rate. But perhaps you've got some little security in this piece of paper. One thing is plain: they certainly believe in the deposit of jewels themselves, else they wouldn't have taken so much trouble to get

the paper back, on the chance of seeing some way of using it after they had got into the house they speak of."

"Then I guess I'll go on with the thing, if that's it."

"That depends of course on whether you care to take trouble to get possession of what, after all, is somebody else's lawful property."

Hoker looked a little uneasy. "Well," he said, "there's that, of course. I didn't know nothin' about that at first, and when I did I'd parted with my money and felt entitled to get something back for it. Anyway the stuff ain't found yet. When it is, why then, you know, I might make a deal with the owner. But, say, how did you find out my name, and about this here affair being jined up with the Wedlake jewels?"

Hewitt smiled. "As to the name and address, you just think it over a little when you've gone away, and if you don't see how I did it, you're not so cute as I think you are. In regard to the jewels—well, I just read the message of the 'Flitterbat Lancers,' that's all."

"You read it? Whew! That beats! And what does it say, and where? How did you fix it?" Hoker turned the paper over eagerly in his hands as he spoke.

"See, now," said Hewitt, "I won't tell you all that, but I'll tell you something, and it may

help you to test the real knowledge of Luker and Birks. Part of the message is in these words, which you had better write down: *'Over the coals the fifth dancer slides says Jerry Shiels the horney.'*"

"What?" Hoker exclaimed, "Fifth dancer slides over the coals? That's a mighty odd dance figure, anyway, lancers or not. What's it all about?"

"About the Wedlake jewels, as I said. Now you can go and make a bargain with Luker and Birks. The only other part of the message is an address, and that they already know, if they have been telling the truth about the house they intend taking. You can offer to tell them what I have told you of the message, after they have told you where the house is, and proved to you that they are taking the steps they talk of. If they won't agree to that I think you had best treat them as common rogues (which they are), and charge them with obtaining your money under false pretences. But in any case don't be disappointed if you see very little of the Wedlake jewels."

Nothing more would Hewitt say than that, despite Hoker's many questions; and when at last Hoker had gone, almost as troubled and perplexed as ever, my friend turned to me and said. "Now, Brett, if you haven't lunched, and would like to see

the end of this business, hurry up!"

"The end of it?" I said. "Is it to end so soon? How?"

"Simply by a police raid on Jerry Sheil's old house with a search warrant. I communicated with the police this morning before I came here."

"Poor Hoker!" I said.

"Oh, I had told the police before I saw Hoker, or heard of him, of course. I just conveyed the message on the music slip, that was enough. But I'll tell you all about it when there's more time; I must be off now. With the information I have given him, Hoker and his friends may make an extra push and get into the house soon, but I couldn't resist the temptation to give the unfortunate Hoker some sort of a sporting chance—though it's a poor one, I fear. Get your lunch as quickly as you can, and go at once to Colt Row. Bankside—Southwark way, you know. Probably we shall be there before you. If not, wait."

Hewitt had assumed his hat and gloves as he spoke, and now hurried away. I took such lunch as I could in twenty minutes and hurried in a cab towards Blackfriars Bridge. The cabman knew nothing of Colt Row, but had a notion of where to find Bankside. Once in the region I left him, and then Colt Row was not difficult to find. It

was one of those places that decay with an access of respectability, like Drury Lane and Clare Market. Once, when Jacob's Island was still an island, a little further down the river, Colt Row had evidently been an unsafe place for a person with valuables about him, and then it probably prospered, in its own way. Now it was quite respectable, but very dilapidated and dirty and looked as unprosperous as a street well can. It was too near the river to be a frequented thoroughfare, and too far from it to be valuable for wharfage purposes. It was a stagnant backwater in the London tide, close though it stood to the full rush of the stream. Perhaps it was sixty yards long—perhaps a little more. It was certainly very few yards wide, and the houses at each side had a patient and forlorn look of waiting for a metropolitan improvement to come along and carry them away to their rest. Many seemed untenanted, and most threatened soon to be untenable. I could see no signs as yet of Hewitt, nor of the police, so I walked up and down the narrow pavement for a little while. As I did so I became conscious of a face at a window of the least ruinous house in the row, a face that I fancied expressed particular interest in my movements. The house was an old gabled structure, faced

with plaster. What had apparently once been a shop window, or at any rate a wide one, on the ground floor, was now shuttered up, and the face that watched me—an old woman's—looked from a window next above. I had noted these particulars with some curiosity, when, arriving again at the street corner, I observed Hewitt approaching, in company with a police inspector, and followed by two unmistakable plainclothesmen.

"Well," Hewitt said, "you're first here after all. Have you seen any more of our friend Hoker?"

"No, nothing."

"Very well—probably he'll be here before long, though."

The party turned into Colt Row, and the inspector, walking up to the door of the house with the shuttered bottom window, knocked sharply. There was no response, so he knocked again; but equally in vain.

"All out," said the inspector.

"No," I said, "I saw a woman watching me from the window above not three minutes ago."

"Ho, ho!" the inspector replied. "That's so, eh? One of you—you Johnson—step round to the back, will you? You know the courts behind."

One of the plainclothesmen started off, and after waiting another minute or two the inspector began a thundering

cannonade of knocks that brought every available head out of the window of every inhabited room in the Row.

The woman's face appeared stealthily at the upper window again, but the inspector saw, and he shouted to her to open the door and save him the necessity of damaging it. At this the woman opened the window, and began abusing the inspector with a shrillness and fluency that added a streetcorner audience to that already congregated at the windows.

"Go away you blaggards," the lady said—among other things—"you ought to be 'orsew'ipped, every one of ye! A-comin' 'ere a-tryin' to turn decent people out o' 'ouse and 'ome! Wait till my 'usband comes 'ome—'e'll show yer, ye mutton-cadgin' scoundrels! Payin' our rent reg'lar, and good tenants as is always been—as you may ask Mrs. Green next door this blessed minute—and I'm a respectable married woman, that's what I am, ye dirty great cowards!"—this last word with a low tragic emphasis.

Hewitt remembered what Hoker had said about the present tenants refusing to quit the house on the landlord's notice. "She thinks we've come from the landlord to turn her out," he said to the inspector.

"We're not here from the landlord, you old fool!" the in-

spector said, in as low a voice as could be trusted to reach the woman's ears. "We don't want to turn you out. We're the police, with a search warrant to look for something left here before you came; and you'd better let us in, I can tell you, or you'll get into trouble."

"'Ark at 'im!" the woman screamed, pointing at the inspector. "'Ark at 'im! Thinks I was born yesterday, that feller! Go 'ome, ye dirty pie-stealer, go 'ome! 'Oo sneaked the cook's watch, eh? Go 'ome!"

The audience showed signs of becoming a small crowd, and the inspector's patience gave out. "Here Bradley," he said, addressing the remaining plainclothesman, "give a hand with these shutters," and the two—both powerful men—seized the iron bar which held the shutters, and began to pull. But the garrison was undaunted, and seizing a broom the woman began to belabor the invaders about the shoulders and head from above. But just at this moment the woman, emitting a terrific shriek, was suddenly lifted from behind and vanished. Then the head of the plainclothesman who had gone round the houses appeared, with the calm announcement, "There's a winder open behind, sir. But I'll open the front door if you like."

Then there was a heavy

thump and *his* head was withdrawn; the broom was probably responsible. The inspector shouted impatiently for the front door to be opened, and in a minute or two the bolts were shot and it swung back. The placid Johnson stood in the passage, and as we passed in he said: "I've locked 'er in the back room upstairs." As a matter of fact we might have guessed it. Volleys of screeches, punctuated by bangs from contact of broom and door, left no doubt.

"It's the bottom staircase of course," the inspector said, and we tramped down into the basement. A little ways from the stairfoot Hewitt opened a cupboard door which enclosed a receptacle for coals. "They still keep the coals here, you see," he said, striking a match and passing it to and fro near the sloping roof of the cupboard. It was of plaster, and covered the underside of the stairs.

"And now for the fifth dancer," he said, throwing the match away and making for the staircase again. "One, two, three, four, five," and he tapped the fifth stair from the bottom. "Here it is."

The stairs were uncarpeted, and Hewitt and the inspector began a careful examination of the one he had indicated. They tapped it in different places, and Hewitt passed his hand over the surfaces of both tread

and riser. Presently, with his hand at the outer edge of the riser, Hewitt spoke. "Here it is, I think," he said; "it is the riser that slides."

He took out his pocketknife and scraped away the grease and paint from the edge of the old stair. Then a joint was plainly visible. For a long time the plank, grimed and set with age, refused to shift, but at last, by dint of patience and firm fingers, it moved, and in a few seconds was drawn clean out from the end, like the lid of a domino box lying on its side.

Within, nothing was visible but grime, fluff, and small rubbish. The inspector passed his hand along the bottom angle. "Here's a hook or something at any rate," he said. It was the gold hook of an old-fashioned earring, broken off short.

Hewitt slapped his thigh. "Somebody's been here before us," he said, "and a good time back too, judging from the dust. That hook's a plain indication that jewellery was here once, and probably broken up for convenience of carriage and stowage. There's plainly nothing more, except—except this piece of paper." Hewitt's eyes had detected, black with loose grime as it was, a small pice of paper lying at the bottom of the recess. He drew it out and shook off the dust. "Why, what's this?" he exclaimed. "More music!

Why, look here!"

We went to the window and there saw in Hewitt's hand a piece of written musical notation, thus:—



Hewitt pulled out from his pocket a few pieces of paper. "Here is a copy I made this morning of the 'Flitterbat Lancers,' and a note or two of my own as well," he said. He took a pencil and, constantly referring to his own papers, marked a letter under each note on the last-found slip of music. When he had done this the letters read:—

"You are a clever cove whoever you are but there was a cleverer says Jim Snape the horney's mate."

"You see?" Hewitt said, handing the inspector the paper. "Snape, the unconsidered messenger, finding Legg in prison, set to work and got the jewels for himself. He either had more gumption than the other people through whose hands the 'Flitterbat Lancers'

has passed, or else he had got some clue to the cipher during his association with Shields. The thing was a cryptogram, of course, of a very simple sort, though uncommon in design. Snape was a humorous soul, too, to leave this message here in the same cipher, on the chance of somebody else reading the 'Flitterbat Lancers.' "

"But," I asked, "why did he give that slip of music to Luker's father?"

"Well, he owed him money, and got out of it that way. Also he avoided the appearance of 'flushness' that paying the debt might have given him, and got quietly out of the country with his spoil. Also he may have paid off a grudge on old Luker—anyhow the thing plagued him enough."

The shrieks upstairs had grown hoarser, but the broom continued vigorously. "Let that woman out," said the inspector, "and we'll go and report. Not much good looking for Snape now, I fancy. But there's some satisfaction in clearing up that old quarter-century mystery."

We left the place pursued by the execrations of the broom wielder, who bolted the door behind us, and from the window defied us to come back, and vowed she would have us all searched before a magistrate for what we had probably stolen. In the very next street we

hove in sight of Reuben B. Hoker in the company of two swell-mob-looking fellows, who sheered off down a side turning at sight of our group. Hoker, too, looked rather shy at sight of the inspector. As we passed, Hewitt stopped for a moment and said, "I'm afraid you've lost those jewels, Mr. Hoker; come to my office tomorrow and I'll tell you all about it."

III.

"The meaning of the thing was so very plain," Hewitt said to me afterwards, "that the duffers who had the 'Flitterbat Lancers' in hand for so long never saw it at all. If Shiels had made an ordinary clumsy cryptogram, all letters and figures, they would have seen what it was at once, and at least would have tried to read it. But because it was put in the form of music they tried everything else but the right way. It was a clever dodge of Sheils's, without a doubt. Very few people, police officers or not, turning over a heap of old music, would notice or feel suspicious of that little slip among the rest. But once one sees it is a cryptogram (and the absence of bar lines and of notes beyond the stave would suggest that) the reading is as easy as possible. For my part I tried it as a cryptogram at once. You know the plan—it

has been described a hundred times. See here—look at this copy of the 'Flitterbat Lancers.' Its only difficulty, and that is a small one, is that the words are not divided. Since there are on the stave positions for less than a dozen notes, and there are twenty-six letters to be indicated, it follows that quarter notes, eighth notes, and sixteenth notes on the same line or space must mean different letters. The first step is obvious. We count the notes to ascertain which sign occurs most frequently, and we find that the quarter note in the top space is the sign required—it occurs no less than eleven times. Now the letter most frequently occurring in an ordinary sentence of English is *e*. Let us then suppose that this represents *e*. At once a coincidence strikes us. In ordinary musical notation in the treble clef the note occupying the top space would be *E*. Let us remember that presently. Now the most common word in the English language is *the*. We know the sign for *e*, the last letter of this word, so let us see if in more than one place that sign is preceded by two others, identical in each case. If so, the probability is that the other two signs will represent *t* and *h*, and the whole word will be *the*. Now it happens that in no less than four places the sign *e* is preceded by

the same two other signs—once in the first line, twice in the second, and once in the fourth. No word of three letters ending in *e* would be in the least likely to occur four times in a short sentence except *the*. Then we will call it *the*, and note the signs preceding the *e*. They are an eighth note under the bottom line for the *t* and a quarter note on the first space for the *h*. We travel along the stave, and wherever these signs occur we mark them with *t* or *h*, as the case may be. But now we remember that *e*, the quarter note in the top space, is in its right place as a musical note, while the quarter note in the bottom space means *h*, which is no musical note at all. Considering this for a minute, we remember that among the notes which are expressed in ordinary music on the treblestave, without the use of leger lines, *d e* and *f* are repeated at the lower and at the upper part of the stave. Therefore anybody making a cryptogram of musical notes would probably use one set of these duplicate positions to indicate other letters, and as *h* is in the lower part of the stave, that is where the variation comes in. Let us experiment by assuming that all the quarter notes above *f* in ordinary musical notation have their usual values, and let us set the letters over their respective

notes. Now things began to shape. Look toward the end of the second line: there is the word *the* and the letters *ffth*, with another note between the two *fs*. Now that word can only possibly be *fifth*, so that now we have the sign for *i*. It is the quarter note on the bottom line. Let us go through and mark the *is*. And now observe. The first sign of the lot is *i*, and there is one other sign before the word *the*. The only words possible here beginning with *i*, and of two letters, are *it*, *if*, *is* and *in*. Now we have the signs for *t* and *f*, and we know that it isn't *it* or *if*. *Is* would be unlikely here, because there is a tendency, as you see, to regularity in these signs, and *t*, the next letter alphabetically to *s*, is at the bottom of the stave. Let us try *n*. At once we get the word *dance* at the beginning of line three. And now we have got enough to see the system of the thing. Make a stave and put G A B C and the higher D E F in their proper musical places. Then fill in the blank places with the next letters of the alphabet downward, *h i j*, and we find that *h* and *i* fall in the places we have already discovered for them as quarter notes. Now take eighth notes and go on with *k l m n o*, and so on as before, beginning on the A space. When you have filled the eighth notes do the same with six-

teenth notes—there are only six alphabetical letters left for this—*u v w x y z*. Now you will find that this exactly agrees with all we have ascertained already, and if you will use the other letters to fill up over the signs still unmarked you will get the whole message—

"In the Colt Row ken over the coals the fifth dancer slides says Jerry Shiels the horney."

"'Dancer,' as perhaps you didn't know, is thieves' slang for a stair, and 'horney' is the strolling musician's name for a cornet player. Of course the thing took a little time to work out, chiefly because the sentence was short, and gave one few opportunities. But anybody with the key, using the cipher as a means of communication, would read it as easily as print. Snape used the same cipher in his jocular little note to the next searcher in the Colt Row staircase.

"As soon as I had read it, of course I guessed the purport of the 'Flitterbat Lancers.' Jerry Shiels's name is well known to anybody with half my knowledge of the criminal records of the century, and his connection with the missing Wedlake jewels, and his death in prison, came to my mind at once. (The police afterwards, by the way, soon identified his old house in Colt Row from their records.) Certainly here was something

hidden, and as the Wedlake jewels seemed most likely, I made the shot in talking to Hoker."

"But you terribly astonished him by telling him his name and address. How was that?"

Hewitt laughed aloud. "That," he said; "why, that was the thinnest trick of all. Why, the man had it engraved at large all over the silver band on his umbrella handle. When he left his umbrella outside, Kerrett (I had indicated the umbrella to him by a sign) just copied the lettering on one of the ordinary visitor's forms and brought it in. You will remember I treated it as an ordinary visitor's announcement. Kerrett has played that trick before, I fear." And he laughed again.

On the afternoon of the next day Reuben B. Hoker called on Hewitt and had half an hour's talk with him in his private room. After that he came up to me with half a crown in his hand. "Sir," he said, "everything has turned out a durned sell. I don't want to talk about it any more. I'm goin' out o' this durn country. Night before last I broke your winder. You put the damage at half a crown. Here is the money. Good-day to you, sir."

And Reuben B. Hoker went out into the tumultuous world.

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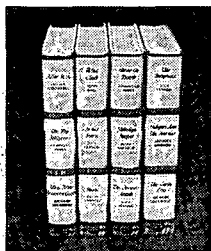
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